Consumers' social media responses to the greenwashing of fashion industries.

A quantitative research on how social media behavior is influenced by greenwashing and trust.

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Abstract

Ethical consumption and responsible consumerism are on the rise in the last decades. Consumers demand green, sustainable products that do not have a hazardous impact on the environment and social life. Some industries managed to respond to this new need by holistic changing their business model and implementing green manufacturing procedures. However, some industries, such as fashion companies, claim to be green by using eco-labels and selling their "sustainable" products for premium prices while engaging in misleading green marketing techniques. The overuse of sustainability buzzwords such as "eco-friendly" and "organic" led to consumer confusion and skepticism around green products. Skepticism may diminish trust and make consumers hesitant to purchase green products. The rise of social media and online communities gave consumers the power to express their feelings and experiences about a brand or a product. Consumers started to seek information about a product from valuable members of their online community to avoid being victims of greenwashing. This research explores the relationship of greenwashing with consumers' eWOM intentions and its relation to trust. Based on these findings, the following research question was formed: To what extent do fashion companies' greenwashing efforts impact consumers' intentions to engage in positive or negative eWOM?

To answer the research question, an online experiment has been conducted with a unifactorial design with three conditions (non-greenwashing condition, greenwashing condition, and a control condition). The sample consisted of 287 respondents. The results showed that greenwashing is not significantly related to positive eWOM but is significantly related to negative eWOM. However, non-greenwashing has a significant relationship with positive eWOM. This means that non-greenwashing behavior can lead to positive eWOM, and greenwashing behavior can lead to negative eWOM.

Furthermore, a full mediation of trust was found in the relationship between non-greenwashing and positive eWOM. Only a partial mediation of trust was found on

the relationship between greenwashing and negative eWOM. The findings of this research provide insights for marketers and the fashion industry into how their engagement in greenwashing behavior negatively influences the messages posted about them by a third party. More research will be necessary to fully explore the relationship between greenwashing, trust, and eWOM.

KEYWORDS: *greenwashing, sustainability, fashion industry, trust, eWOM.*

Preface

My master thesis, **"**Consumers' social media responses to the greenwashing of fashion industries," will be the last thing I will deliver as a student in the master's Media & Business at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. Coming from another country and sacrificing many things to do this master got me disappointed when I realized that the pandemic would last longer than expected and the master would be online. Doing the whole master through zoom was challenging and affected my mental health. However, here I am, delivering my thesis on time while working and experiencing a pandemic. I am more than proud of myself, and now that I have tested my limits, I am sure I know how far I can go, and I am ready to chase the next opportunity.

I would not be able to go through all this without the help of my supervisor, Anne-Marie van Prooijen, who supported me in every step and believed in me even though I had no experience with SPSS and statistics. As Ken Poirot once said, "There is no greater power and support you can give someone than to look them in the eye, and with sincerity/conviction say, I believe in you". Without her trust, I would not be able to finish this project. Furthermore, I would not have succeeded without my roommates Alex and Eugenia, who were there for me whenever I was ready to give up and boosted me with their love. I could not miss saying thank you to my best virtual friend Antonia, that was one of this master's greatest gifts, and she was my rock this last year and my friend Yannis with whom we have laughed and supported each other almost every single day. Also, I would like to thank my boyfriend, Andrea, who bore me and loved me at my worst. Last but not least, I would like to thank my family and friends in Greece because without them I would not be in the place I am today.

Finally, I cannot wait to see what the future holds for me, and I also fiercely hope that sustainability will be the new normality in every sector and place on earth one day.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The rise of sustainability and responsible consumerism

"We deserve a safe future. And we demand a safe future. Is that too much to ask?" is what Greta Thunberg, a young climate activist, said at the Global Climate Strike in New York, 20 September 2019 (BBC, 2019). Climate change has been in the news for decades, but people started feeling its effects personally in the last few years, especially after experiencing COVID-19. Precisely, consumers' interest in sustainability and responsible consumerism has increased significantly (Kim & Oh, 2020). Ethical consumers can be identified as those who consider their consumption's impact on other humans, animals, and the physical environment (McNeill & Moore, 2015). In 2000, a report from The Co-operative Bank, "Who are the Ethical Consumers?" confirmed the power and influence of ethical consumers on how companies manage their green supply chain in the marketplace. The report established that consumers were interested and actively following companies' sustainable practices, rewarding those who managed to manufacture their products in a more socially responsible way (Doane, 2001). After a decade, responsible consumerism and ethical consumers seem to have the same power over companies. In these last two years, people's pandemic reality made them focus even more on ethical consumption and change their habits to create a better, more sustainable world. According to a BBC (2021) survey, most respondents highlighted the need to prioritize climate change in the economic recovery after COVID-19. The shift in consumer habits and the revolution of consumers towards environmental protection seem to establish responsible consumerism as the new norm.

In times of growing concerns about global warming, economic crises, and a pandemic, it seems only natural that companies go green. Consumers' growing demand for sustainability and their willingness to purchase and pay premium prices for green products led many companies to engage in sustainable behavior such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Kong et al., 2020). CSR means that organizations engage in responsible behavior towards their stakeholders and society (Martínez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013). Companies can have various motives for their engagement in sustainability and CSR activities (Vries et al., 2015). Two of the primary motives of why brands engage in CSR are public-

serving motives and firm-serving motives (Foreh & Grier, 2003). The public-serving motives refer mainly to the common interest in environmental protection, whereas firm-serving motives refer primarily to a company's benefits, such as increasing its profit and adopting socially responsible behavior (Foreh & Grier, 2003). Specifically, according to researchers (Miotto & Youn, 2020; Kong et al., 2020), a positive relationship exists between a brand's CSR engagement and financial and social performance. In addition, Ginsberg and Bloom (2004) found that a green brand image may enhance customers' brand attachment and, as a result, increase customer loyalty. However, companies may not live up to their CSR promises. For instance, a company may share misleading information about its CSR performance to improve or reshape its reputation (Vos, 2014). CSR and the terminology of sustainability have been used so widely by companies that the line between what is considered sustainable and truly sustainable has blurred (Yan et al., 2012).

Fashion industries are considered one of the most toxic industries, having a disastrous impact on the environment, increasing concerns about the reliability of their sustainable practices (Delieva & Eom, 2019). Even though the fashion industry has shown some considerable efforts in building a more sustainable future concerning their production methods and operationalization, the lack of clarity characterizing their green brand messages has raised consumers' concerns around greenwashing (Yan et al., 2012). Corporate greenwashing refers to the idea of a company intentionally framing its performance as "green" to look environmentally friendly (Laufer, 2003). Sometimes, brands engage in dishonest environmental behavior to rebuild their public reputation or shape a more responsible image (Wang et al., 2019). In other words, instead of lying outright, corporate greenwashing is generated and established as a state between rhetoric and reality; the truth about CSR is sometimes archived, exaggerated, or distorted in public communications (Vos, 2014). According to research (Guo et al., 2017, Chen et al., 2018), greenwashing behavior negatively affects consumers' trust in a brand, undermining the brands' credibility and green associations. Despite its intentions, it is eventually all about whether consumers perceive corporate greenwashing (Vries et al., 2015). The extent to which consumers perceive a brands' green identity as trustworthy or not will determine their response and actions towards the

brand(Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

In recent years, many companies have incorporated social media as a marketing tool that can help them establish consumer-brand solid connections and advertise their products cheaply and innovatively (Chu & Kim, 2011). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media are internet-based applications that allow users to create and exchange content. Social media may take the form of a variety of online information sharing, such as social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) and microblogging sites (e.g., Twitter) (Chu & Kim, 2011). Consumers may use social media to engage in online communication and share their experiences about a product or a brand (Fu et al., 2015). These experiences can affect how consumers perceive a brand and whether they would like to share negative or positive information. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p.39). Nowadays, due to the rise of social media, information can be spread to a large audience instantly. This means that if consumers decide to engage in negative information sharing to punish a brand for its' greenwashing behavior, they can easily cause a backlash, threaten the brand's reputation, and result in trust loss (Lyon & Montgomery, 2013). But can greenwashing affect consumers' eWOM intentions? Will consumers engage in negative eWOM to punish the company once they realize a brand is greenwashing, decreasing their trust in the brand?

Furthermore, marketeers have been interested in promoting positive eWOM since it can strengthen consumers' trust in a brand (Cheung et al., 2009). The factor affecting consumer trust behavior is perceived risk; when consumers feel that they are about to enter into a risky situation by purchasing a product, they tend to avoid it or try to seek more information about the product through eWOM (Khwaja et al., 2020). Therefore, positive eWOM can positively impact consumers' purchase intentions since it reduces purchase risk, helping a company create a strong brand image and decreasing its overall marketing costs (Chu & Kim, 2011). However, will consumers be willing to engage in positive eWOMto reward only brands with strong environmental performance and make honest green claims? The information above has led to the formulation of the following research

question: To what extent do fashion companies' environmental performance impact consumers' intentions to engage in positive or negative eWOM?

1.2 Theoretical and social relevance

The rise of greenwashing is an issue that deserves serious attention from marketers. Greenwashing is still a popular method adopted by many brands that threaten' the progress to real sustainability' (Chen & Chang, 2013). Greenwashing is dominant in the green marketing world and endangers its development (Chen et al., 2014). Greenwashing in the fashion industry is on the rise (Phau & Ong, 2007). Sustainability does not have a clear, quantifiable definition. As a result, companies can use terms such as "ethical" and "eco-friendly" to describe the attributes of their products without being accountable for their actions in case of disinformation (Berrone et al., 2017). Marketers in the fashion industries mainly use messages that lack explicit meaning to advertise their sustainable products, causing consumer confusion and establishing greenwashing as their primary marketing technique (Yan et al., 2012). When it comes to greenwashing, many studies focus on the greenwashing effects on consumer purchase intentions. Specifically, greenwashing has become a widespread phenomenon across organizations and is negatively related to customers' purchase decisions for quality-labeled products (Zhang et al., 2018a). However, previous research (Bartels et al., 2020; Pomering & Johnson, 2009; Wang et al., 2018) suggested that greenwashing can damage consumers' purchase intentions. However, there has been limited research considering how consumers process and react to environmental messages and how customers might lose their trust in a quality label product and brand due to the awareness of its green misinformation (Chen & Chang, 2013).

Furthermore, the advent of web-based online opinion platforms and their power to electronic word of mouth are also worth considering. Consumers tend to rely on online messages and advertising about a product to gather information about it (Lee & Hong, 2016). Especially when it comes to fashion, consumers tend to trust social media platforms and influencers before choosing their garments and brands. Yet, researchers have not often studied consumer motives behind eWOM spreading, even though understanding those motives could strengthen managers' and corporate

decision-makers' ability to encourage eWOM (Jeong & Jang, 2011). Besides, because eWOM is something quite new, few studies examined the antecedents to engage in eWOM in social media (Erkan & Evans, 2016). There was also limited research on the effects of greenwashing in the generation of eWOM and its impact on consumer's perceptions of a brands' green initiatives.

This research contributes to the already existing literature as it adds a new dimension to the studies on fashion industries, greenwashing, and consumers' eWOM intentions. The clothing industry has a great potential for sustainability development (Goworek, 2011). However, greenwashing thrives in it being one of the main obstacles to real sustainability. Fashion consumers expect full transparency across the fashion industry value chain to be able to trust a brand (Chen & Chang, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to indicate to marketeers how to create an honest and ethical market for consumers. Until now, much research has been conducted about trust in relation to eWOM (Khwaja et al., 2020; Nam et al., 2020; Paço & Reis, 2012), greenwashing, and trust (Chen et al., 2019; Chen & Chang, 2013; Khwaja et al., 2020) and greenwashing's influence to purchase intentions (Cheung & To, 2020; Kanchanapibul et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2018). Research about eWOM in relation to greenwashing and trust, connected to the fashion industry, would contribute to the overall knowledge of these subjects and lead marketers to take a stand on environmental values consumers care about.

This research has societal relevance as well, as the pandemic revealed the earth's need to recharge and peoples' consumption choices to change into more ethical ones (BBC, 2021). Even though a lot of studies focus on the environmental impact of natural gas or oil, according to Ritchie and Roser (2016), the oil and natural gas sector is responsible for 3.9 % of global emission, position in this way, the fashion industry as more polluting with somewhere between 4% and 8% of global carbon emissions. The foundation system of the fashion industry is currently based on extremely fast cycles of production, mass-production, and fast-changing trends (Joergens, 2006). A fashion that fast cannot be sustainable. More awareness should be created around the fashion industry's environmental impact. Consumers are starting to be skeptical because they are often victims of the fashion industry's green marketing misleading techniques (Kim & Lee, 2009). Skepticism can affect consumers' purchase intentions and trust in a brand (Paço & Reis, 2012). Distrust in a brand and the feeling of

misleading can trigger consumers to react. More will be learned about how consumers use their social media to promote or discourage potential consumers from choosing a specific fashion brand through this research. Since more and more consumers started thinking ethically and want to change their habits to preserve the environment, it is necessary to discover how they state their ethical behavior through social media (Fatma et al., 2020).

This study aims to answer the research question using a quantitative research method to examine the relationship between the variables. The data are collected through an online experiment that was spread through Facebook and LinkedIn. In this experiment, a fictitious fashion company is represented differently across three conditions. In the first condition, the fashion company is presented as claiming and truly being sustainable (non-greenwashing condition), in the second condition, the company is claiming to be sustainable while scoring low on sustainability (greenwashing condition), and the third condition provides no background information (control condition). The purpose of this online experiment is to find out how respondents will assess a Facebook post about sustainability in fashion. The follow-up questions concerning the morality and competence of the company will provide a clear overview of the respondents' trust in the fashion company and whether this is influenced by the different posts they saw in the conditions they were aligned to. Moreover, questions concerning respondents' eWOM intentions are included after the manipulation.

1.3 Chapter outline

This thesis focuses on the relationship between greenwashing and eWOM. The basis of this research is laid on the theoretical framework, which is the first chapter and is presented after the introduction. In this chapter, the concepts of ethical fashion, greenwashing, eWOM, and trust will be further explained. Based on previous literature, four hypotheses were created, 2 of them presented in the section of eWOM and two presented in the section of trust. The third chapter is the methodology and strives to explain why quantitative methods were chosen for this research and why it was best to explore this relationship by conducting an online experiment. This chapter introduces the sampling method and the sample demographics, providing descriptive statistics. These sub-chapters are followed by the presentation of the sampling procedure and stimulus material. Therefore, the operationalization of the variables and

the reliability and validity of this research are discussed. The fourth chapter is the results section and presents the findings of the analyses conducted. This chapter includes a randomization check conducted by a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) and a Chi-Squared test to test the relationships between the variables and check whether the randomization of the groups worked. The findings of the analysis will indicate where the hypotheses are supported or rejected. The fifth chapter of this study will be the discussion part. This chapter includes an answer to the research question, theoretical and practical implications, research limitations, and directions for future research. The sixth and final chapter will be a short conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The rise of ethical fashion

Consumers' awareness of environment-related issues and sustainability is growing in combination with their demand for ethical brands and environmentally friendly merchandise (Kong et al., 2020). Consumers, particularly those of the young generation, are becoming highly conscious of information concerning the material source of the apparel they buy (Kanchanapibul et al., 2014). They tend to search for more information about material suppliers before purchasing to ensure that the fashion supply chain they choose to trust is ethical (Kanchanapibul et al., 2014). However, ethics and sustainability in the fashion industry are considered an oxymoron (Miotto & Youn, 2020). Apparel manufacturers are often accused of being engaged in unsustainable practices. The environmental impact of fashion industries is massive due to its inherent characteristics (Shen et al., 2014). The production process involves high water usage, pollutive chemical dyeing and preparation techniques; a high amount of waste produced during disposal; discharging of toxic chemicals, and the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides (Blasi et al., 2020). Thus, fashion industries are also criticized for their fair-trade conditions, being accused of not paying fair wages and providing poor working conditions that violate human rights (Birtwistle & Moore, 2007).

Consumers' enlightenment about fashion industries' operation conditions and the public criticism of some international brands, such as Nike and Gap, being accused of producing some of their merchandise in offshore sweatshops led to the increaset of responsible consumerism (Goworek, 2011). According to Danziger (n.d.), responsible consumerism was one of the six global consumer trends in 2019. This

shift in sustainable consumption and consciousness provided the basis for the rise of ethical consumers. Ethical consumers can be identified as those who consider their consumption's impact on other humans, animals, and the physical environment (McNeill & Moore, 2015). Global warming, climate change, and the unprecedented times consumers experienced with the pandemic significantly increased their need to include sustainability in every part of their lives. According to Mortimer (n.d.), the latest IAG New Zealand Ipsos poll found that almost four out of five people (79%) say climate change is an important issue for them. An international study of 20,000 customers by grocery brand giant Unilever identified one in three (33%) people were choosing to buy from brands they believe are doing environmental good. Consumers are increasingly concerned about their purchases' social impact, and they are willing to pay premium prices for ethical products (Kong et al., 2020). In response to this global interest, some brands engaged in new ethical and sustainable regulations.

Consumption changes and multiple media reports around fashion industries' environmental impact paved the way for creating an ethical clothing market (Goworek, 2011). According to Joergens (2006), ethical fashion can be defined as "fashionable clothes that incorporate fair-trade principles with sweatshop-free labor conditions while not harming the environment or workers by using biodegradable and organic cotton" (p.361). Ethical fashion is a broad concept used interchangeably with many other terms such as sustainable clothing, sustainable fashion, green fashion, and eco-fashion. All of them refer to conscious fashion practices (Joergens, 2006). There are various ways to identify sustainable fashion. Some of them include: textiles made by recycled materials; organic materials; transparency around materials sources and garment manufacturing; fashion that considers animal care; fair-trade fashion, and vintage fashion (Kim & Oh, 2020). However, the ethical fashion definition can be ambiguous because of its misuse by some fashion brands that define themselves as ethical while still engaged in unsustainable practices. The fashion industry has a complex supply chain that is considered less transparent than other sectors (Blasi et al., 2020). In this sector, there is difficulty in monitoring how all the suppliers work and considering all the environmental and social aspects, from fair working conditions to the garments' after-treatment and disposal.

From luxury to non-luxury and fast fashion, fashion industries started to adopt sustainable techniques to reduce their environmental impact and enhance their

workers' living conditions (Kong et al., 2020). Luxury brands are sometimes indistinctly perceived as synonymous with sustainability due to their timeless and high-quality products (Bae, 2019). Contrary to fast fashion brands engaged in mass production of affordable and trendy clothes that are not produced to be worn more than ten times (Miotto & Youn, 2020). Burberry is defined as a luxury brand. The company launched a sustainable agenda and committed to reducing its environmental impact and contributing to climate change by 2022 (Bae, 2019). Burberry publicly shared its agenda and commitments for a better future. Despite their efforts, the company encountered a backlash after the media revealed that the brand burned 38 million dollars-worth of unsold garments in September 2018 (Bae, 2019), recanting their sustainable claims with their actions. Simultaneously, fast fashion brands such as H&M, Zara, and Uniqlo launched conscious collections to meet the consumers' new ethical demands. For instance, H&M, a Swedish multinational retail company, announced its commitment to transforming all the materials used in its garments into renewable ones by 2030 (Kim & Oh, 2020). However, according to The Independent (n.d.), new materials are much more sustainable than using many sustainable yarns already available on the market. As they stated, a fashion that "fast" can never be sustainable (Independent, n.d). Media are wide awake, monitoring all the efforts of fashion companies ready to detect misleading messages. To tackle the challenge of being criticized in every step, fashion companies incorporated new marketing strategies.

2.2 The rise of green marketing

Sustainable consumption growth increased environmental legislation and media exposure of ecological disasters (Paço & Reis, 2012). Consumers' need for environmentally responsible industries and stakeholders' tendency to invest in green sectors led to the rise of corporate environmentalism and green marketing strategies implementation (Jain & Kaur, 2004). As defined by Polonsky (1994), green marketing refers to "all activities designed to generate and facilitate any exchanges intended to satisfy human needs or wants, such that the satisfaction of these needs and wants occurs, with a minimal detrimental impact on the natural environment" (p.2). Companies can apply green marketing to positively contribute to environmental and climate change and respond to the rapidly changing consumer needs. Thus, green marketing definition is not restricted to environmental claims and packaging

development. It incorporates a broader meaning that encloses all those marketing activities needed to establish and sustain consumers' green attitudes and behaviors (including brand identification, green consumer trust, and demand for green products) in an environmentally friendly way (Jain & Kaur, 2004).

Companies may build a green brand identity in order to promote their reduced environmental impact and establish their brand as eco-friendly (Hartmann et al., 2005). The power of consumers' green purchase behavior and the dramatic increase of green product sales stimulated companies to change their marketing strategies and engage in green marketing to satisfy consumers' informational needs around green production. According to Chen (2010), there are five reasons businesses engage in green marketing strategies: to accept environmental pressures; to gain a competitive advantage; to strengthen their brand image; to pursue new opportunities and increase product value. A well-implemented green strategy can enhance a company's socially responsible image, making it hard to imitate (Jain & Kaur, 2004). As mentioned above, the apparel industry has been criticized for its' socially responsible behavior, having a detrimental environmental impact, and jeopardizing workers' well-being (Birtwistle & Moore, 2007; Blasi et al., 2020; Shen et al., 2014;). However, in the last decades, an increasing number of fashion companies changed their business model by partly engaging in green marketing. For instance, According to Fairtrade International (2017), global retail sales of sustainable products almost doubled between 2008 and 2015, reaching 7.3 billion, while fair-trade sales in the U.S. increased by 33% in 2015. The manufacturing of eco-friendly apparel is an important strategy for fashion companies as it provides the chance to obtain a competitive advantage. In addition, Eco-design can increase customers' interest and loyalty (Shen et al., 2014). According to Chan and Wong (2012), green marketing could promote eco-fashion consumption. Nevertheless, a well-structured company deems sustainability as a chance to enhance social responsibility and as a key to corporate survival (Shen et al., 2014). Long-established fashion brands, including Levi Strauss, American Apparel, H&M, and ZARA, have responded to the growing media and consumer attention around sustainability by modifying their fashion to an ethical one, introducing lines with representative collection names. For instance, H&Ms' conscious collection is a great marketing technique since its name implies a promise for reducing their negative environmental impact (Shen et al., 2014). The aim of

fashion companies' engagement in green marketing was twofold: first, to advertise their environmental claims, and second, to establish their presence in the green market (Yan et al., 2012).

Fashion-oriented consumers are willing to pay more for ethically manufactured garments; thus, they started checking their trademarks to reassure the materials' sustainable source (Phau & Ong, 2007). This has not gone unnoticed by the retailers. To communicate their new environmental image, retailers adopted trademarks such as "eco," "green," "natural," and "organic" to describe the attributes of their products and ensure consumers that environmental legislations and responsibilities are being respected (Phau & Ong, 2007). Trademarks are labels, words, or symbols identifying a product's source (Berrone et al., 2017). Consumers can find trademarks in almost every textile hanging in a retail store, indicating the source of their materials. However, the number of green labels increased dramatically in the last fifteen years (Gruere, 2013). Since incorporating a green trademark does not require companies to have a specific environmental quality level, sustainable and unsustainable companies can acquire them with similar costs (Berrone et al., 2017). The increased number and diversity of green trademarks by the fashion industries raised concerns around their reliability.

2.3 The phenomenon of greenwashing

When some less transparent fashion brands are using trademarks such as "eco-design" or "eco-friendly," they frequently lack explicit meaning and avoid providing consumers with adequate information around the eco-fashion manufacturing process (Yan et al., 2012). Misleading claims used to overemphasize a company's environmental performance can create greenwashing concerns (Gruere, 2013). Greenwashing definition is implemented to explain a brand's dishonesty and deceptive environmental claims when indicating being green, eco, and sustainable while they are not (Parguel et al., 2008). Companies tend to adopt greenwashing behaviors due to their inability to perform based on their CSR promised actions (Chen, 2010). Specifically, more than 75% of the S&P 500 companies consistently share information about their environmental policies and performance on their websites. Almost 98% of products with environmental claims deceive consumers by being committed to one or more aspects of the "seven sins of greenwashing," including "sin of the hidden trade-off," "sin of no proof," "sin of vagueness," "sin of

irrelevance," "sin of the lesser of two evils," "sin of fibbing" and "sin of false labels" (Zhang et al., 2018).

Greenwash can harm the market demand by creating consumer confusion and making them hesitant to purchase green products (Pomering & Johnson, 2009). Eventually, consumer's green purchases will decrease. Consumer confusion is defined as "a consumer's failure to correctly interpret a product's environmental features due to information overload or poor communication between consumers and brands" (Turnbull et al., 2000, p.141). Consumer confusion can emerge from three primary sources: unlimited choice of products, product resemblance, and information ambiguity (Chen & Chang, 2013). Information overload is the main reason for the rise of consumer confusion (Chen & Chang, 2013). More specifically, too vague, too similar, and too ambiguous information can be hard to distinguish and be processed by consumers. For instance, consumers are so confused by green marketing terminology that they cannot determine the difference between terms such as "energy efficiency," "smart-energy," or "energy conservation" (Paço & Reis, 2012). The vast amounts of relevant information offered cannot be processed in the time available, causing confusion (Mitchell et al., 2005). Consumer confusion creates a misinterpretation of the green market and green product attributes. At the same time, consumers might appear indecisive due to the perceived physical similarity of the products available, also known as product resemblance confusion (Mitchell et al., 2005). Information ambiguity results from the misleading environmental claims conveyed through green marketing (Mitchell et al., 2005). According to Lyon and Maxwell (2011), consumers admitted that companies' claims around green products are perceived most of the time as a marketing technique, and they would distrust the green claims. As a result, greenwash may increase consumer suspicion around the reliability of green products and decrease their sales (Polonsky et al., 2010). Consumer confusion caused by some brands' greenwashing and the generalized difficulty in determining the "environmental truth" has created skepticism around green marketing (Paço & Reis, 2012).

Green skepticism can be defined as consumers' doubtfulness and distrust towards firms' green claims or public relation efforts (Forehand & Grier, 2003). Consumers can use skepticism as a defense mechanism to protect themselves from being victimized by a company's misleading green marketing techniques (Bartels et

al., 2020). Consumer skepticism can damage green marketing's efficiency, which may be induced by consumer perceptions of CSR (Kim & Lee, 2009). For instance, when a low CSR firm may engage in green marketing, its environmental claims may seem inconsistent with its existing performance reputation. This can result in consumers questioning the firm's motives and create mistrust of the brand (Kim & Lee, 2009). Increased consumer skepticism may lead to negative attitudes towards a company's green initiatives and green campaigns. For instance, according to Cone Communications (n.d.), most of the consumers respond that if they feel deceived by a company, they will punish it by boycotting a product (71%) or even all the company's products (37%). Based on other research (Bartels et al., 2020; Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017; Vries et al., 2015), the higher the consumer skepticism levels, the less positive their attitudes, brand evaluation, and word-of-mouth intentions, and the lower the consumers' purchase intentions. Besides, Leonidou and Skarmeas (2017) found that consumer skepticism around a company's CSR initiatives can lead to a diminished intention to speak positively or even speak negatively about a brand.

2.4 eWOM intentions

Green marketing has become a fascinating tool to attract ethical consumers. In the last decades, more and more firms are becoming environmentally friendly (Jain & Kaur, 2004). As a result, terms such as "sustainability," "eco," "green" are widespread and overused by industries. The overused green claims can be misleading, vague, and as a result, lack trustworthiness. Deceived consumers may engage in word of mouth (WOM) to send strong environmental messages and force companies to change their marketing strategies (Chen et al., 2014). WOM is defined as a verbal, informal, person-to-person communication about a brands' or an organizations' products or services (Zhang et al., 2018; Eisingerich et al., 2015; Chu & Kim, 2011). WOM has proved to be a significant driver for consumers purchasing decisions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). WOM is created and shared by a more trustworthy source of information (friends, relatives) about products and brands. Thus, consumers tend to trust WOM instead of the company's compelling advertising messages when searching for information about a product they want to purchase (Chu & Kim, 2011). However, a general swift towards e-commerce replaced the traditional WOM model with eWOM (Eisingerich et al., 2015). In a nutshell, the emergence of web 2.0 provided consumers more options for collecting objective product information from other consumers and

the chance to express their own experiences with a product by engaging in eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

The emergence of social networking sites (SNSs) offered companies new communication opportunities with their consumers and became a valuable platform for sharing their CSR activities (Fatma et al., 2020). According to Du and Vieira (2012), SNSs usage may strengthen CSR communication because users can easily share information with others. The SNSs that companies mostly use for their corporate communication is Facebook (Tao and Wilson, 2015). SNSs such as Facebook is a worldwide phenomenon. Facebook is considered one of the largest "news" organizations globally, with over one billion active users globally, while over 50% of all users log on to Facebook daily (Gans, 2011). SNSs provided the opportunity for the rise of eWOM, which proved to be more effective than offline WOM (Eisingerich et al., 2015). With SNSs, consumers get the chance to connect with one another and the brands they support easily. eWOM communication may include non-textual communications, which can be identified by peers such as "liking" or "sharing" a brands Facebook page or post, "retweeting" a story on Twitter, as well as writing reviews or comments about experiences or opinions around a brand and its products on SNSs (Wolny & Mueller, 2013). Unlike WOM, the lack of geographical restrictions and information sharing (preferred time and speed) characterizing eWOM in SNSs, made consumers feel more comfortable sharing experiences and emotions, making the messages and the platform (Facebook) very personal (Eisingerich et al., 2015). There are a lot of reasons making consumers willing to engage in eWOM.

Consumers tend to gather and form online communities to exchange ideas with people who share the same interests. SNSs have transformed from a social platform into a forum where consumers share their comments and opinions about the products and the services they choose to purchase (González-Soriano et al., 2020). These comments have an impact on the purchase decision of the people who read them. Consumers may engage in eWOM because of their willingness to help other consumers with their purchase decisions, protect others from negative experiences, or both (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Consumers' environmental concerns may also play an important role in consumers' willingness to engage in eWOM. According to (Toti & Moulins, 2016), there is a dilemma regarding ethics of consumption in which the

issue is the perception of morality; how much is consumer ethics worth to them? This means that some people may have to build a stronger environmental identity than others. More specifically, environmental self-identity refers to the extent to which someone perceives their actions as good for the environment (van der Werff et al., 2013). People with a strong environmental identity may engage more easily in pro-environmental behavior (ethical consumption) compared to those who have a weak environmental identity (van der Werff et al., 2013). This means that ethical consumers may be more likely to engage in eWOM when they see a post concerning sustainability or a brands' green initiatives than consumers with less ethical or unethical consumption habits.

Moreover, there are three more distinct motives for consumers to engage in eWOM: *concern for other consumers;* related to the concept of altruistic or prosocial behavior, *helping the company;* satisfied consumers willing to give the company something in return for their good experience and *social benefit*; affiliation with a virtual community, feeling of belonging (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). According to the *social benefit* motive, SNSs allow consumers to think that they belong in a group and enhance both their personal and social identity. Social identity theory suggests that the self-concept consists of personal identity (i.e., self-identity) and social identity (i.e., group membership), both used to maintain positive self-worth (Kim et al., 2018). Social identity is an important factor for the generation of eWOM, while it can also influence consumers' willingness to participate in positive eWOM (González-Soriano et al., 2020). Facebook is a very personal platform, including multiple information related to social identities such as gender, age, or hometown. Having several social connections and generating the feeling of belongingness in a group made the platform a source for increased self-worth and self-integrity (Kim et al., 2018). Specifically, consumers' eWOM messages can be more valuable and helpful to consumers who share a similar social identity because social identity information is prominent on Facebook. In particular, based on the concept of social identity, the similarity between the source and the receiver can enhance eWOM's influence because people choose to connect with those similar to themselves (Kim et al., 2018). This means that when a person defines themselves as an ethical consumer and reads a post about an honest green organization, they will probably engage in positive eWOM because it corresponds to their identity and enhances their social presence.

Furthermore, companies engage in CSR for many reasons, and one of them is to gain positive eWOM (Fatma et al., 2020). Companies with strong environmental performance and transparent green operations may increase consumers' willingness to engage in positive eWOM. Based on the social identity theory, consumers who identify with a socially responsible brand tend to engage in positive eWOM and share positive comments about the brand. This enhances their self-esteem and projects an ethical consumer's image (Fatma et al., 2020). Companies' engagement in CSR through SNSs provides favorable terms for consumers to assess a company's green activities and engage in conversations that may result in positive eWOM (Fatma et al., 2020). In addition, positive views of a brand's CSR activities among consumers can also lead to positive eWOM (Liu & Keng, 2014). When consumers read reviews about a brand or a product based on positive eWOM and positive social media posts, they may engage in further positive actions such as positive reactions and message sharing (Liu & Keng, 2014).

Conversely, when consumers see a post disclosing negative information about an organization, they will be less motivated to share something positive because it will oppose their already shared ethical social image. Consumers' social behavior may be motivated by the “concern for others.” Consumers may engage in negative eWOM communication to deter or even protect their online community (consumers who share the same social identity) without expecting anything in return, only to prevent them from experiencing the same failures as they did (Fu et al., 2015). For instance, consumers may engage in negative eWOM when they feel victimized by a brand's greenwashing behavior and read a message that provides ambiguous information about its green activities (Zhang et al., 2018). The individuals may spread the word about the brands' misleading green messages to warn or deter potential consumers from trusting the brands' green claims (Liu & Keng, 2014). Thus, after experiencing an inconsistency based on the products' promised characteristics and the actual ones, they want to expose the company and feel powerful by protecting other potential consumers from falling into the same greenwashing trap. According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), negative eWOM can affect the way a company's brand image is perceived. In conclusion, the increasing availability and accessibility of information combined with the increasing speed they can spread created a new challenge for businesses; Web-based opinion platforms and the rise of eWOM shifted the power

from companies to consumers who can now impact a company's performance by engaging in eWOM (Fatma et al., 2020). Based on the information above, the following hypotheses were formed:

H1: Participants that receive non-greenwashing information will have higher positive eWOM intentions than participants that receive greenwashing information and the control group.

H2: Participants that receive greenwashing information will have higher negative eWOM intentions than participants that receive non-greenwashing information and the control group.

2.5 The mediating role of trust

As mentioned above, companies seem to incorporate CSR and sustainability strategies as a tool to enhance their legitimacy and brand image (Ioannou & Serafeim, 2019). Brand image plays an important role, especially in markets where the products' characteristics are similar, such as fashion clothing. A brand image can be defined as consumers' perceptions about a brand and its product attributes (Cretu & Brodie, 2007). Based on this definition, Chen (2010) described a green brand image as consumers' perceptions around a brands' environmental commitments and environmental concerns. Green brand image has proved to be important for companies nowadays under the rise of ethical consumption demand. Specifically, by implementing a green brand image, companies can avoid potential threats such as environmental protests or eWOM punishment, but most importantly, they can respond to consumers' sustainable expectations and needs, increasing consumer satisfaction and trust. However, to promote their brand image successfully, brands should be capable of integrating their green ideas into all aspects of marketing (Kong et al., 2020). Consumers expect sustainable brands to make a long-term environmental commitment that they can keep.

Furthermore, a brand's engagement in CSR can also enhance a brand's legitimacy by improving its environmental performance. Corporate legitimacy is defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructive system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman,1995, p. 574). Legitimacy is approved only when behaviors, values, and beliefs are shared with various stakeholders, in other words, when it is transparent and responsibly shared (Miotto & Youn, 2020).

Corporate legitimacy is vital for a company's survival since it provides access to resources necessary for a successful operation (Miotto & Youn, 2020). Corporate legitimacy can also foster consumer trust in the company and create a favorable perception of a brands' products and operation (Fatma et al., 2020). Trust is defined as a positive psychological state regarding the belief of an exchange party's ability, credibility, benevolence, and predictability to fulfill their obligations in uncertain or vulnerable circumstances (Chen & Chang, 2013). Thus, green trust is the willingness to rely on a product or a service based on the expectations resulting from its integrity, benevolence, and ability about environmental performance (Chen, 2010).

Customer satisfaction is regarded as an important antecedent of trust (Chen & Chang, 2013). A buyer's overall satisfaction with a product or service they purchased can lead to higher trust and brand loyalty (Chen & Chang, 2013). Brands that have a strong environmental performance and incorporate transparent green actions can increase consumer satisfaction levels. Based on the “help the company” motive mentioned above, satisfied consumers may engage in positive eWOM to share their experiences with other potential consumers and pay off the company for their excellent experience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). In addition, consumers' perceived quality of a product or a service is also an important prerequisite for trust (Chen & Chang, 2013). Perceived quality has a crucial role in the environmental era since consumers' perception of a high-quality product can lead to high levels of trust in the product or the brand (McKnight et al., 2004). Increased perceived quality can foster positive eWOM. This means that when companies meet consumers' environmental expectations and indicate a strong environmental performance, consumers' trust will be increased (Kong et al., 2020).

High levels of trust can lead to positive eWOM and diminish perceived risk or consumers' skepticism around a company's environmental performance (Khwaja et al., 2020). However, many companies fabricate their environmental performance to increase the price and value of their products (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). Precisely, some companies implement CSR and sustainability only as a way to enhance their image and legitimacy while continuing to produce and promote new products that encompass misleading and dishonest green claims (Chen, 2010). By exaggerating their environmental performance and products, green quality brands can increase consumers' perceived risk (Zhang et al., 2018). When brands incorporate misleading

and confusing green claims about their products' attributes, consumers may be reluctant to trust and pay premium prices for their green products. Perceived risk can minimize consumers' willingness to purchase a brand's products and negatively impact their attitude towards the brand leading to trust loss (Chen & Chang, 2013). For instance, consumers' satisfaction and perceived quality will be decreased when they realize that the product they purchased does not apply to their green expectations and the brand was greenwashing. Poor perceived quality and low levels of satisfaction may diminish trust (Chen & Chang, 2013).

In a nutshell, greenwashing behavior can damage consumers' trust because in case consumers realize that a green message is ambiguous or dishonest, they will feel deceived (Kong et al., 2020). Deceived consumers may engage in negative eWOM to prevent other potential consumers and exert power on the greenwashing company by exposing their actions online (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). When companies engage in greenwashing actions and mislead their consumers, the latter will not be willing to build a long-term trust relationship. Besides, consumers will embody a general distrust towards the company's environmental efforts, impede the progress towards real sustainability and lose stakeholder support in their strategies (Chen & Chang, 2013).

Distrust in a brand may lead consumers to speak negatively about their experience with the brand (Paço & Reis, 2012). Negative eWOM has a stronger influence on consumers' brand perception than positive eWOM (Nam et al., 2020). That means that negative eWOM can impact consumers' purchase intentions and negatively influence a brands' sales. Consumers are more likely to memorialize negative than positive eWOM information (Nam et al., 2020). However, when brands behave according to the CSR strategies, showing their strong environmental performance and reporting their contribution to environmental change, consumers' trust will be increased. High levels of trust can encourage consumers to speak positively about a brand (Kong et al., 2020). Positive eWOM can lead to a more favorable attitude towards a brand or a product and preserve consumers' trust in the brand (Nam et al., 2020). Based on the information above, it is assumed that trust is a mediator in the relationship between greenwashing and eWOM intentions. This information has led to the following hypotheses:

H3: The effect of non-greenwashing on positive eWOM is mediated by trust.

H4: The effect of greenwashing on negative eWOM is mediated by trust.

2.6 Conceptual Models

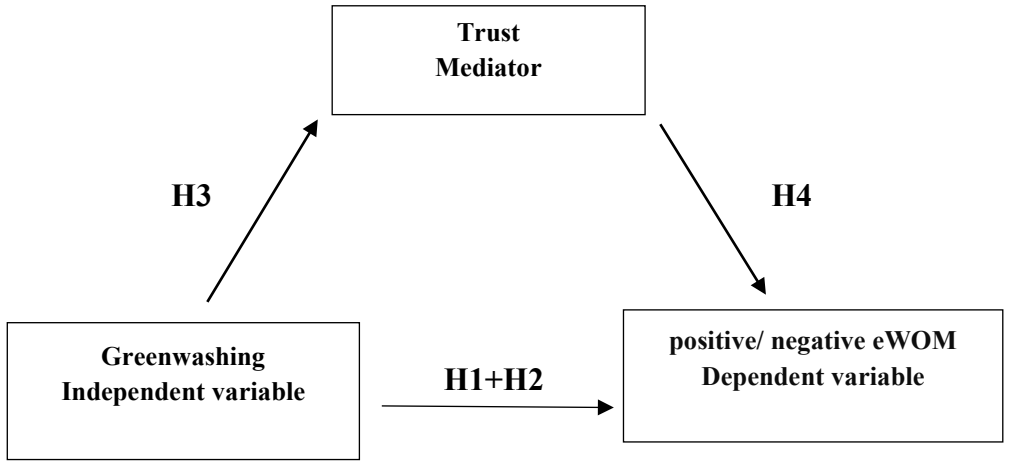


Figure 2.6.1. Conceptual model including the hypotheses.

3. Method

This chapter explains the choices made regarding the research design, sampling, execution, and analysis. The method that has been chosen is discussed first. Then, the sampling method and sample are described, followed by the survey procedure and stimulus material. This is followed by a description of the operationalization of the measurements. Finally, the validity of the research is explained.

3.1 Choice of research method

To gather and analyze the data, this research used quantitative methods. Specifically, quantitative methods strive to be systematic because the goal is to capture details based on the empirical social world and represent them numerically

(Neuman, 2014). This method aims to determine valid and reliable measurements that can be used for statistical analysis (Goertzen, 2017). This research gathered the data through an online experiment since experiments consider to be one of the most effective designs for testing causal hypotheses (Neuman, 2014).

3.1.1 Quantitative method

Quantitative research strives to be systematic and precise as it tries to determine validity and reliability while analyzing the causal relationship between variables (Brennen, 2017). Since the aim of this research was to examine the relationship between variables and to be able to determine whether the independent variable (greenwashing) does influence the dependent variable (eWOM), an online experiment was used as the most suitable method. Specifically, to examine the causal relationship between the independent and dependent variables, several hypotheses were formulated based on literature research that has already been conducted. Since this research has one independent variable with three levels, the hypotheses were examined through a unifactorial experiment design with three conditions: greenwashing, non-greenwashing, and a control group. This allowed the researcher to examine the independent variable in different situations and examine interactions between the variables (Collins et al., 2009). The type of experimental design was a between-subjects experiment. This means that the experiment participants were assigned to different conditions, each experiencing only one experimental condition (Charness et al., 2012). The experimental design provides the most effective method for testing causal hypotheses because it allows researchers to test each created condition's hypotheses, examining the variables in different positions (Check & Schutt, 2012). Each group in the experiment represents another condition of the independent variable (greenwashing) to examine whether it influences the dependent variable (eWOM)

The experiment was conducted online because of the current pandemic situation. Additionally, online experiments are cheaper, quicker, result in large sample sizes, and have high statistical power (Barchard & Williams, 2008). A disadvantage of this online method is that issues of confidentiality and anonymity may arise. Survey respondents may have concerns around the issues surrounding survey privacy (Barchard & Williams, 2008). In order to protect participants' anonymity, the experiment included a small text on the first page clarifying that participants' data will

be anonymous and used for a students' thesis. Besides, the buttons "consent" and "do not consent" "my data to be used and analyzed for educational purposes" were also added to the first page.

Another disadvantage of this online method is that online experiments can have low response rates (Fielding et al., 2017). To reduce the non-response rates, the experiment was optimized to function on laptops, computers, and mobile phones so that respondents can complete a survey on their preferred speed, even while they are on the move (Fielding et al., 2017). This research was unbiased since the respondents were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions through Qualtrics, and each group was equivalently treated. The control group's presence, coupled with random assignment, also decreased internal validity threats (Bryman, 2016).

Another disadvantage is that there may be biases in the final sample because participants could drop out during the experiment because they were somehow interrupted and never finished their session (Dandurand et al., 2008). Respondents can also drop out of the experiment when they feel exposed to controversial questions they do not feel comfortable answering. Many researchers have also reported that it is hard to keep participants concentrating for more than 20 to 30 minutes on a survey before getting distracted or starting responding randomly (Rice et al., 2017). This may cause some limitations concerning the accuracy of the data from a time-consuming survey (Rice et al., 2017). Besides, keeping participants concentrate is even more challenging in online experiments due to the lack of control over the setting in which participants provide their answers.

This research tried to prevent any possible implications by stating that participation in these experiments is important and that the goal is to obtain valid scientific data. Furthermore, for increasing credibility, contact information for questions was provided in combination with the researcher's name and institutional affiliation (Dandurand et al., 2008). Also, the researcher sent several general reminders out more than once in the groups and apps. Additionally, the questions included in the survey tried to be simple so that nobody will feel nervous or embarrassed to answer them. Accessible questions could increase the motivation of participants to stay and complete the survey (Neuman, 2014) In the end, the survey length was a median of 6 to 7 minutes so that participants will stay concentrated and manage to finish their session, providing accurate responses.

3.2 Sampling

This research used a non-probability snowball sampling strategy as a part of convenience sampling. With snowball sampling, the researcher usually contacts a small group of people related to the research topic. Based on these connections, it reaches people beyond its network in a cheap and fast way (Bryman, 2016). This sampling method was chosen to spread the survey through social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn. The selection of networking sites clarifies where the experiment was distributed and increased control over the sampling phase (Bryman, 2016). The survey was spread and answered by people from the researcher's network and applied to their networks, who share similar interests.

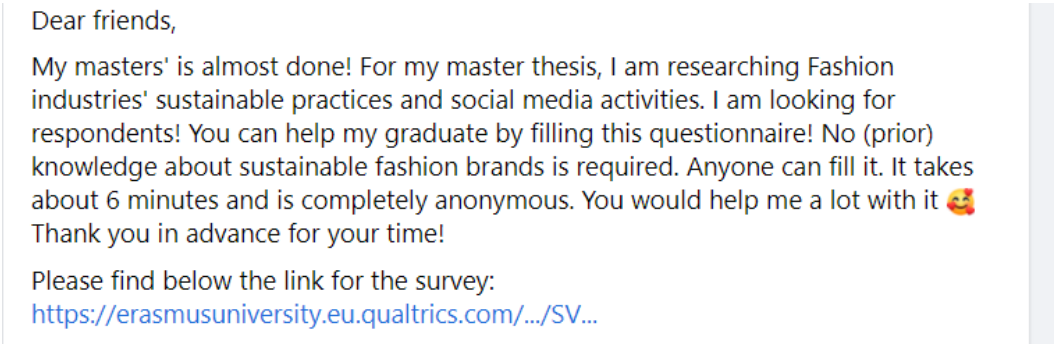


Figure 3.2.1. The message put on Facebook page of the researcher

Figure 3.2.2. The message put on LinkedIn page of the researcher.

A disadvantage of a convenience sample can be that it is often not representative of larger populations, raising concerns about external validity (Bryman, 2016). To counteract that, the survey was also spread to pages and mediums that the researcher is not a member of or does not already have an existing account. For instance, the survey was shared on the page of a Greek festival (Eyes walk digital festival) and a company's staff private WhatsApp group chat (Concentrix Netherlands). A larger sample can reduce the chance of bias (Bryman, 2016). The research population was everyone over the age of 18, has used Facebook in the past half-year, and speaks English as the language of the questions in the experiment was English. Before sharing the survey online, three people read through the survey to ensure that everything was clear for them. Afterward, the link to the experiment was spread on the researchers' Facebook and LinkedIn pages. Since the experiment was distributed online, people not familiar with using the internet were automatically excluded from participating in the survey. A sample of 468 respondents started the survey, but many did not finish it, leaving important questions unanswered. Eventually, this led to a sample of 287 participants whose responses have been collected between March 23 th and April 6 th.

3.2.3 Demographics

Several demographics, such as gender, age, and income, have been included in the survey as control variables. Based on previous literature, these demographics seemed to impact one or more variables of this research. For instance, concerning gender, Haytko and Matulich (2008) found that women tend to be more skeptical towards green marketing than men. Contrary, Paço and Reis (2012) found no significant gender difference concerning skepticism towards green advertising. Based on these contradicting findings, gender was included in the research, and it was tested to examine whether it has a significant effect on the research results.

Furthermore, since ethical goods tend to cost more than regular goods and since ethical consumption may be considered "luxury" for some, income was also included as a control variable. According to Starr (2009), people with higher income are more likely to engage in ethical consumption, but it is not clear that they are also more likely to embrace a wide range of ethical consumption practices. Based on the findings mentioned above, income has been considered in this experiment since it might influence the results. Finally, age was also included as a demographic question.

Mishra et al. (2018) found that adolescents have incorporated the internet in various aspects of their lives. They use social media to engage in eWOM to voice their consumption experiences with others who share the same interests. These findings of adolescents were taken into account since age may also influence participants' intentions to participate in eWOM.

3.2.4 Sample

The final sample included 287 respondents. In total, 188 responses were excluded from the survey as non-valid. Of these 188 participants, 100 skipped some questions, 20 did not have a Facebook account, and 68 stopped answering the questions too early. Based on the data cleaning, the valid responses led to a sample of 287 respondents.

A complete overview of demographic data is shown in Appendix A and B. All respondents were at least 18 years old. The observed age range has been 18 to 69, with a mean of 27.20 and a standard deviation of 7.07. Regarding gender, 83 (28.9%) respondents identified as male, and 202 (70.4%) identified as female. In addition, 2 participants (0.7%) would rather not share their gender.

All respondents answered the question about their yearly income. Most of them, more particularly 197 respondents (68.6%), earned between 0 and 24.999 euros per year. 37 respondents (12.9%) earn between 25.000 and 49.999, 6 participants (2.1%) earn between 50.000 and 74.999 euros and only 4 respondents (1.4%) earn between 75.000 and 99.999 euros per year. However, 15 participants (5.2) stated that they do not know their yearly income, while 28 participants (9.8) did not want to share their income.

All participants answered the questions about Facebook usage. 32 respondents (11.1) stated that they use Facebook very infrequently, 27 participants (9.4) stated that they use Facebook somewhat infrequently, while 51 participants (17.8) stated that they use Facebook occasionally. Most of the participants 75, (26.1 %), stated that they use Facebook somewhat frequently, while most participants, 102 (35.5 %), stated that they use Facebook very frequently.

Furthermore, participants were randomly assigned via Qualtrics into the three different conditions of the experiment. Specifically, 90 (31.3%) of the participants saw the greenwashing condition, 96 (33.4 %) saw the control condition, and 101 (35.2 %) saw the non-greenwashing condition. Finally, responses from respondents were

collected from all over Europe (mainly Greece and Netherlands; the researchers' birth country and current country of residence) since the experiment was English.

3.2.5 Survey procedure

As referred to above, the experiment has been optimized to function on laptops, computers, and mobile phones. Besides, before starting the survey, participants read a message that informed them that the time needed to answer the questions was a maximum of six minutes. The messages also made clear that participation was voluntary. Participants could quit anytime they wish to by just closing the internet browser. This information, combined with the increased accessibility of the experiment, may have increased the number of respondents. Furthermore, the experiment was shared through Facebook and LinkedIn. The researchers' network reshared the experiment, and as a result, the post was reshared 16 times in 16 different Facebook profiles and three times in 3 different LinkedIn profiles.

Before starting the survey, participants had to consent, accepting that the data they provide will be used in this research. To increase participants' trust around anonymity and confidentiality of the research, the researcher's email has been presented given the respondents' opportunity to email the researcher with questions or comments. Nevertheless, there were no emails with additional questions or complaints about the survey. About the survey structure, the first question in the survey was about the participants' environmental concerns. After this, respondents received a Facebook post under three conditions (i.e., the manipulation), showing additional messages about a fictitious fashion company's sustainable collection. The following sub-chapter (i.e., 3.2.5 Stimulus material) is further elaborating on these three conditions.

Furthermore, after the manipulation, a manipulation check has been introduced to check consumers' interpretation of the post they just saw. Firstly, the respondents answered a statement concerning the fictitious fashion company’s posts they just saw whether they perceived the company as sustainable. Secondly, questions about the morality and competence of the company followed. These two scales indicate the trust the respondents have in the organization they show the post about. Two more scales were then presented, asking the respondents whether they intended

to share positive or negative eWOM concerning the post they just saw. In the end, the survey included questions about Facebook usage and demographic questions such as age, gender, and income. On the last page, the survey informed the participants that the company used was fictitious. The FTC (federal trade commission) link was presented if respondents wanted to explore the topic on a grander scale. Once more, the respondents are thanked for their participation, and the researcher's email is included in case of questions (See Appendix).

3.2.6 Stimulus materials

The manipulation of this experiment consisted of three different conditions (greenwashing, non-greenwashing, and the control group). Participants received a text that they had to read carefully. This text included background information about the fictitious company created for the experiment, named 34-Threads. Afterward, participants would see a Facebook post about the launch of a new sustainable collection by 34-Threads. All participants saw the same Facebook post, but they received different background information depending on the three conditions (non-greenwashing, greenwashing, control group).

To be more precise, participants were told that they were about to see an advertisement of a fashion brand on social media. As a first step, participants would first receive some background info about the brand. This info contained the experimental manipulation. Specifically, in the first condition, the non-greenwashing condition, participants read a message about a fictitious fashion company named 34-Threads. The text that participants read provided information about consumers' rising ethical clothing demand and brands' efforts to satisfy their needs. Sometimes, these efforts could be misleading since brands can incorporate green trademarks even though they do not represent their actual green performance. To support the information, an example of H&Ms' dishonest sustainability actions was provided. In the end, the message made clear that according to an investigation made by FTC (Federal Trade Commission), the fashion company 34-Threads scored high on sustainability. So, it claims and truly is sustainable. In the second condition, the greenwashing condition, participants read the same message with the important difference that the FTC investigation proved that the fictitious fashion brand, 34-Threads, scored low on sustainability. The message made evident that the brand goes against its promised CSR and green initiatives and, in other words, is greenwashing.

In the third condition, the control condition, participants did not receive any additional information. Precisely, participants were redirected to the Facebook post of the fictitious fashion brand straight away.

All the participants saw the same Facebook post that included a description text stating that 34-Threads is launching a sustainable activewear collection made with organic cotton, announcing that the company's goal is to become a climate-positive brand by 2030. The post was created using AdParlor, a website that made the post seem real since it is possible to illustrate reactions and choose the number of them such as 20 "wow," 60 "love," and 43 "angry" while also you can illustrate many comments and shares of the post. The fashion company's name was picked after research to ensure that there is no actual company using this name. The researcher later designed the brand's logo. The decision to make the fashion company fictitious was to tackle the thread of biases. According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), consumer motives to engage in eWOM are mostly about brands they know and experiences with products of these known brands. When consumers have prior knowledge or experiences with a brand or product, they may have a more tender reaction to the spread of negative eWOM about the brand than consumers who do not have this prior knowledge or experience with the brand (Doh & Hwang, 2009). Using a fictitious fashion brand, biases such as participants' attachment with a brand were tackled. Last but not least, participants did not know that there were multiple versions of the survey and that each one received and responded to a different condition. This means that respondents were unaware of the actual purpose of this research and the fact that different groups will be compared to each other.

3.3 Measurements and operationalization

This research's goal is to answer the research question. To do so, the data collected from the survey needs to be analyzed and tested for its reliability and validity. Reliability and validity can influence the quality of the data obtained. In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the data, a manipulation check has been conducted, followed by factor analysis and reliability analysis for its' one of the factors.

3.3.1 Manipulation Check

A manipulation check has been included in the survey distributed in order to explore how different groups interpreted the manipulation they have seen. Specifically, after the manipulation text and Facebook post, respondents saw they had to answer one question. This question was about whether they consider the company the Facebook post and text referred to as sustainable. This means that the manipulation was measured with one item through a continuous variable. Respondents were asked to indicate on a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree) whether the statement "34-threads is a sustainable fashion company" applied to them. All respondents answered the question (N = 287). The mean score was 4.42, with a standard deviation of 1.49.

3.3.2 eWOM

The dependent variable, *eWOM,* was measured with ten items (adapted from Eisingerich et al., 2015). Six items were about *positive eWOM,* and four were about *negative eWOM.* A factor analysis was conducted, including all the ten items used to measure eWOM. Specifically, a factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Varimax rotation based on Eigenvalues (> 1.00), *KMO* = .88, $\chi 2$ (N = 287, 45) = 2105.48, $p < .001$) showed that the items indeed load upon two factors: *positive eWOM* and *negative eWOM.* The resultant model showed that positive eWOM explained 43.5 % of the variance, and negative eWOM explained 32.1 % of the variance.

Based on the factor analysis (see Table 3.3.2.1), *positive eWOM* intentions were measured with six items. These included whether the respondent was willing to like the message, post a positive reaction under the message, would share the message with friends, would say positive things about it on Facebook, would recommend it to friends, and whether they would start to follow the Facebook page of the company. They had to indicate their answers on a Likert scale on whether the statement will apply to them. The items were Likert-scale based, and respondents had to answer ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree) whether the statement applied to them. The scale's Cronbach's alpha was .91. This means that the scale is reliable. The items were computed into a new variable named *positive eWOM.* The mean score was 3.85, with a standard deviation of 1.41.

Furthermore, the other factor found (see Table 3.3.2.1) was *negative eWOM* intentions, and it was measured with four items. These included whether the respondent is willing to post a negative reaction under the post, whether they want to share the post with their friends to express negative feelings about it if they would be willing to say negative things about the company on Facebook, and whether they would say negative things about the fashion products they deliver to their customers (Eisingerich et al., 2015). Respondents had to answer again based on a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree) on whether the statement applied to them. The scale's Cronbach's alpha was .93. This means that the scale is reliable. There was no need to delete an item since it would only decrease Cronbach's alpha score. The items were computed into a new variable named *negative eWOM*. The mean score of the scale was 2.06, with a standard deviation of 1.13.

Based on the factors, it was clear that the two variables, positive eWOM and negative eWOM, have their own meaning. This means that they represent two different parts of eWOM, so it would be better to test them separately. Hypothesis 1 & 2 refer to positive and negative eWOM separately because, based on the literature (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Liu & Keng, 2014; Zhang et al., 2018b), greenwashing is related to negative eWOM. At the same time, CSR activities and strong environmental performance are related to positive eWOM. Therefore, people's intentions and motives to participate in positive and negative eWOM might differ and, as a result, provide different outcomes.

Table 3.3.2.1: Factor and reliability analysis for scales for eWOM

Item	Positive eWOM	Negative eWOM
I would give a positive reaction under the post.	.87	
I would say positive things about the company on Facebook.	.86	
I would start to follow the Facebook page of the company.	.83	

I would "like" this post on Facebook.	.83	
I would share this post with friends.	.81	
I would recommend the clothes of this company to friends.	.81	
I would be willing to say negative things about the company on Facebook.		.95
I would share the post with friends to express negative feelings.		.92
I would give a negative reaction under the post.		.90
I would say negative things about the fashion products they deliver to their customers.		.88
R^2 (variance explained)	43.46	32.17
Cronbach's alpha	.91	.93

3.3.3 Trust

Trust is used as a mediator in this research and was measured with three items related to morality (honesty, sincerity, and trustworthiness) and three items related to competence (competence, intelligence, and skillfulness) which are both indicators of trust (Leach et al., 2007). For the first item based on morality, respondents indicated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Very Low) to 7 (Very High), whether fashion companies' norms and values correspond with the above characteristics based on their perception. For the second item, based on competence, respondents had to indicate again on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Very Low) to 2 (Very High), whether the fashion companies' norms and values based on their perception, the

fashion companys' norms, and values correspond with the above characteristics.

A factors analysis (see Table 3.3.3.1) using Principal Components extraction with Varimax rotation based on Eigenvalues (> 1.00), *KMO*= .82, $\chi 2$ (*N*= 287, 15) = 1309.45, $p < .001$) was conducted. The analysis showed that three items (honesty, sincerity, and trustworthiness) belonged to morality and the other three items (competence, intelligence, and skillfulness) belonged to competence. The resultant model showed that morality explained 66.56 of the variance, and competence explained 83.52 of the variance. Both morality and competence consider two factors that may cause people to trust an organization in the first place (Terwel et al., 2009). These two underlying factors comprise the variable named *trust*. Since combining these two subscales can provide a full explanation of the variable trust, it was decided to combine them into one scale named *trust.*

Reliability analysis was conducted to test the scale *Trust.* Precisely, the factor *Trust* gave a Cronbach's alpha of .89. This means that the scale was very reliable since the alpha had a score higher than .80. The mean score of the scale was 4.44, with a standard deviation of 1.12.

Table 3.3.3.1: Factor and reliability analysis for scales for trust

Item	Morality	Competence
Sincerity	.97	
Honesty	.98	
Trustworthiness	.85	
Competence		.74
Intelligence		.96
Skillfulness		.91
R^2	66.56	16.96
Cronbach's alpha	.93	.86

To test the correlation between the two scales, a bivariate correlation analysis was conducted. The results indicated that the two scales were found to be strongly correlated $r = .60$, $p < .001$. Therefore, the two scales, *competence,* and *morality* have been put together into a reliability test. The scales' Cronbach's alpha was .89,

indicating a high-reliability score for the scale. The mean score was 4.44, and the standard deviation was 1.12. Based on the results, a new variable was created, named *trust.* For every analysis from now on, this new variable was used for *trust* unless stated otherwise.

3.3.4 Environmental Concerns

The control variable, environmental concerns, was measured with 5 items related to ethical consumption behavior (Toti & Moulins, 2016). Respondents indicated their answers on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree) whether they will engage or not in an ethical consumption behavior based on their environmental concerns. A factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with oblimin rotation based on Eigenvalues (> 1.00), *KMO*= .77, $\chi 2$ (*N*= 287, 10) = 455.166, $p < .001$) was conducted. The analysis showed that all the items belonged to one factor named environmental concerns. The resultant model explained 55.38 of the variance. Reliability analysis was conducted to test the scale of environmental concerns. Precisely, the factor environmental concerns gave a Cronbach's alpha of .77. This means that the scale was reliable. The mean score of the scale was 5.13, with a standard deviation of 0.92.

3.4 Relationship Analysis

The relationships between the variables in this research were tested through different types of analysis. Specifically, the relationship between the dependent variables (positive eWOM and negative eWOM) and the independent variable (greenwashing conditions) was tested through a one-way ANOVA, as well as the relationship between positive and negative eWOM with the control variables (age, environmental concern, and Facebook usage). In addition, the relationship between the control variable gender and positive and negative eWOM was tested through a Chi-Squared test. Furthermore, the effect between the independent variable (greenwashing conditions) and the dependent variable (eWOM) will be tested by simple regression analysis, as will the effect between the independent variable

(greenwashing conditions) and the mediator (trust). Finally, the mediation analysis will be done by conducting multiple regression analysis.

3.5 Validity and reliability

This research quality is going to be assessed based on validity and reliability. According to Bryman (2016), "Validity refers to the issue of whether an indicator (or set of indicators) that is devised to gauge a concept measures that concept" (p.171), while reliability is concerned mainly with whether the results of the research are replicable (Hauser et al., 2018). In order to increase the research's validity, respondents were randomly assigned by Qualtrics on one of the three different conditions. Random assignment decreases bias between groups and increases internal validity since participants have an equal chance of being assigned to an experimental or control group. This means that the researcher can eliminate bias, for instance, the participants' individual characteristics that may affect the research outcome (Neuman, 2014). However, a factor that might threaten internal validity is the maturation effect. According to Bryman (2016), participants may change and be more experienced, so they may be reluctant to the treatment and get easily bored. Therefore, the survey was not distributed to the researcher's co-students to decrease this threat, and the questions were short and straightforward. Furthermore, to increase external validity and produce generalizable results, this research clearly defined the research population and obtained a large sample that can be considered representative of the population (Neuman, 2014).

A manipulation check was also conducted to check the effectiveness of the treatment. In other words, to ensure that participants comprehended and reacted to the questions based on the manipulation (Hauser et al., 2018). Moreover, the scales used for this experiment were adapted from previous research. That means they were already tested, and they all had a Cronbach's alpha above .80, suggesting that all the scales were internally reliable (Bryman, 2016). Furthermore, to ensure reliability, the experiment design had standardized conditions (Neuman, 2014), which means that all participants received the exact same information and were treated under the same conditions. In addition, to ensure reliability, the methods of this research were applied consistently (Neuman, 2014). This means the research had the same measurement scales for each variable, and participants received the same questions.

4. Results

This chapter includes the results obtained by the data analysis gathered via Qualtrics in SPSS. As a first step, a manipulation check was conducted through an ANOVA to ensure that the treatment was effective. As a second step, all the control variables were checked to see if there was any significant effect in the three conditions. This was examined through an ANOVA and specifically a test of between-subjects effects. As a final step, there were the analyses of the hypotheses. An analysis was conducted for every potential relationship stated in the hypotheses. The analyses conducted included a one-way ANOVA, a two-way ANOVA, bivariate regression analyses, and multiple regression analyses.

4.1 Manipulation Check

An ANOVA was conducted for the manipulation check, which showed a significant main effect for the greenwashing conditions on considering 34-threads as a sustainable fashion company, $F(2, 284) = 9.96$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .051$. Furthermore, the Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that there was a significant difference between participants that were assigned to the non-greenwashing condition ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.31$) and the ones assigned in the greenwashing condition ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.61$), $p < .001$. This means that participants in the non-greenwashing condition agreed more that 34-threads is a sustainable company than participants assigned to the greenwashing condition. Furthermore, a significant difference was also found between the non-greenwashing and control groups ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.42$), $p < .001$. Specifically, non-greenwashing scored higher than the control group. However, there was no significant difference between the greenwashing and the control group. Hence, the manipulation was successful.

4.2 Randomization

In this experiment, the respondents were randomly assigned to three different conditions (greenwashing, non-greenwashing & control conditions). Testing if the randomization worked is important since it is necessary to guarantee that the results are not influenced by the difference in demographics that may arise between the groups. Therefore, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of the control variables in positive eWOM and negative eWOM. If the control variables did not significantly differ within the groups, they were not considered in the following

analysis. However, in case the groups differ significantly in their scores for the control variables, that means that the randomization did not work. In this case, the control variables are important and taken into consideration in the analysis**.**

One-way ANOVA revealed a non-significant main effect for the control variable age, $F(2, 284) = .28$, $p = .753$ as well as for the environmental concerns $F(2, 284) = 1.70$, $p = .187$ and for the Facebook use frequency $F(2, 284) = .44$, $p = .643$. A Chi-square test was conducted to test any significant difference for the control variable gender for positive and negative eWOM. The Chi-square results revealed that there was no significant difference for gender $\chi2(N=287, 4) = 4.49$, $p = .344$. Based on the results above, the randomization was successful since there were no significant main effects; no control variables were included for the hypothesis testing.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

4.3.1 The influence of greenwashing in positive eWOM

In the first hypothesis (H1), it was stated that participants that receive non-greenwashing information would have higher positive eWOM intentions than participants that receive greenwashing information and the control group. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to explore the relationship between the greenwashing conditions (independent variable) and positive eWOM (dependent variable). ANOVA revealed a significant effect for the greenwashing conditions on positive eWOM intentions $F(2, 284) = 7.29$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta2 = .049$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that participants in the non-greenwashing group ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.19$) were significantly more willing to engage in positive eWOM intentions than the participants in the greenwashing group, that were significantly less willing to engage in eWOM ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.46$), $p < .001$. However, the control group ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.47$), $p = .082$, did not differ significantly from the non-greenwashing and the greenwashing condition, $p = .220$. This means that participants in the non-greenwashing group have higher positive eWOM intentions than participants in the greenwashing and the control group. As a result, hypothesis 1 is supported.

4.3.2 The influence of greenwashing in negative eWOM

In the second hypothesis (H2), it was stated that participants that receive greenwashing information would have higher negative eWOM intentions than participants that receive non-greenwashing information and the control group. A one-

way ANOVA was conducted to explore the relationship between the greenwashing conditions (independent variable) and negative eWOM (dependent variable). ANOVA revealed a significant effect for the greenwashing conditions on negative eWOM intentions $F(2, 284) = 6.50$, $p = .002$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that participants in the greenwashing condition were significantly willing to engage in negative eWOM ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.31$), $p = .010$ than the control group ($M = 1.86$, $SD = .92$), $p = .003$. However, participants in the non-greenwashing condition were not significantly willing to engage in negative eWOM ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.09$), $p = .909$. This means that respondents in the greenwashing group had a higher mean score on negative eWOM intentions than the non-greenwashing and control group respondents. As a result, hypothesis 2 is also supported.

4.3.3 The meditation effect of trust in the relationship between greenwashing and eWOM.

To investigate hypothesis 3 and hypothesis 4, a mediation analysis was performed. The relationship for positive eWOM was stated in hypothesis 3: the effect of greenwashing on positive eWOM is mediated by trust. The relationship for negative eWOM was stated in hypothesis 4: the effect of greenwashing on negative eWOM is mediated by trust. Since negative and positive eWOM intentions are considered separate and not reverse variables, it is important to find out more about both types of eWOM intentions. Therefore, the model was tested twice through a mediation analysis, also called multiple regression analysis. For the following analysis, two dummy variables were created, including the concept of conditions and eWOM. The first dummy variable (greenwashing dummy) separates the greenwashing condition (1) from the non-greenwashing and control condition (0). The second dummy variable (non-greenwashing dummy) separates the non-greenwashing condition from the greenwashing (1) and control condition (0). Dummy variables were created to be able to include the categorical variables in the regression analysis. For trust, the mentioned above-computed variable was used to test the relationships.

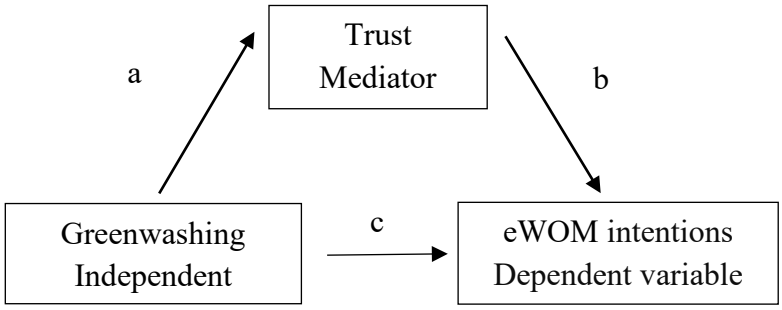


Figure 4.3.3.1 Relationships that are tested for the complete model.

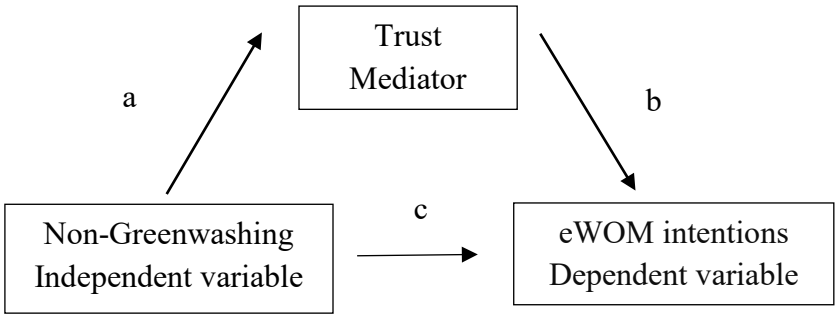


Figure 4.3.3.2 Relationships that are tested for the complete model.

4.3.4 Positive eWOM (H1)

-The relationship between greenwashing and positive eWOM (c).

To test the relationship between greenwashing and positive eWOM, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted. The independent variables were the dummy variables. The dependent variable was the intention to participate in positive eWOM, which is a continuous variable. The model found to be significant, $F(2, 284) = 7.29$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .05$. Specifically, the results showed no significant relationship between greenwashing and control condition on positive eWOM ($\beta = -0.11$, $p = .097$). However, there was a significant effect of the non-greenwashing dummy on positive eWOM. Non-greenwashing had a positive significant influence on positive eWOM intentions ($\beta = .14$, $p = .032$).

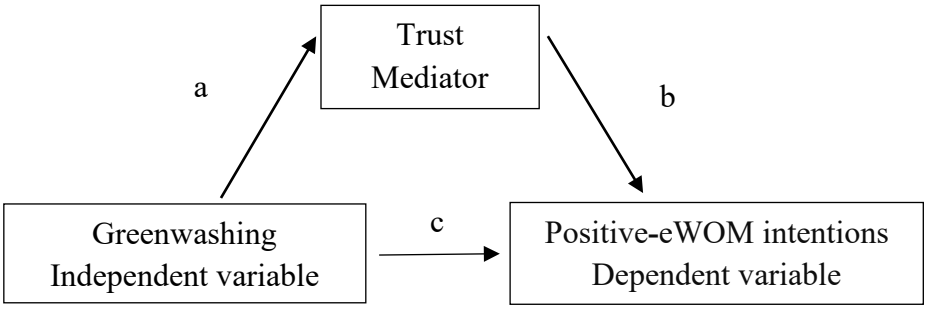
- The relationship between non-greenwashing and trust (a).

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between dummy non-greenwashing and trust, a continuous dependent variable. Dummy greenwashing was not included in this analysis since there was no significant relationship with positive eWOM intentions ($p = .097$). The model was found to be significant, $F(1, 285) = 15.03$, $p < .001$, R2 = .05. Non-greenwashing had a positive significant influence on trust, ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$).

- The influence of both trust and non-greenwashing on positive eWOM intentions (b+c).

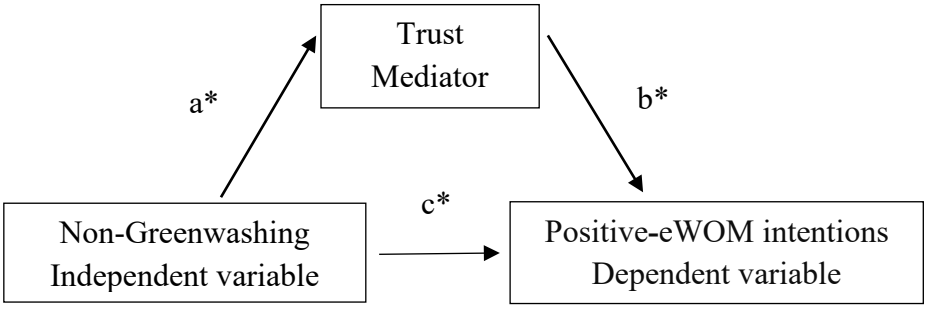
In hypothesis 3, it was stated that the effect of non-greenwashing on positive eWOM is mediated by trust. A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to test the relationship between trust, the dummy non-greenwashing, and positive eWOM intentions. Trust and dummy non-greenwashing were the independent variables used as predictors, and positive eWOM was the dependent variable. Trust and positive eWOM are both continuous variables. The model was found to be significant, $F(2, 284) = 43.70$, $p < .001$, R2 = .24. There was a significant relationship between trust and positive eWOM. This means that trust has a positive significant influence on positive eWOM, ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$). The results also indicated that the effect of non-greenwashing on positive eWOM completely disappears ($\beta = .01$, $p = .069$) when trust is included in the regression. This means that trust fully

mediates the relationship between non-greenwashing and positive eWOM. Based on the results above, hypothesis 3 is supported.



*Note: * $p < .001$*

Figure 4.3.6.2 Significant and non-significant relationships in the model of positive eWOM



*Note: * $p < .001$*

Figure 4.3.6.3 Significant and non-significant relationships in the model of positive eWOM

4.3.5 Negative eWOM (H2)

- The relationship between greenwashing and negative eWOM (c).

To test the relationship between greenwashing and negative eWOM, a regression analysis was conducted. The independent variables were the dummy variables. The dependent variable is the intention to participate in negative eWOM, which is a continuous variable. The model found to be significant, $F(2, 284) = 6.50$, $p < .001$, $R2 = .04$. Specifically, there was a significant relationship between greenwashing and negative eWOM. This means that greenwashing has a significant positive influence on negative eWOM intentions, ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$). However, no significant relationship was found between the non-greenwashing and control conditions with the negative eWOM intentions ($\beta = .03$, $p = .678$).

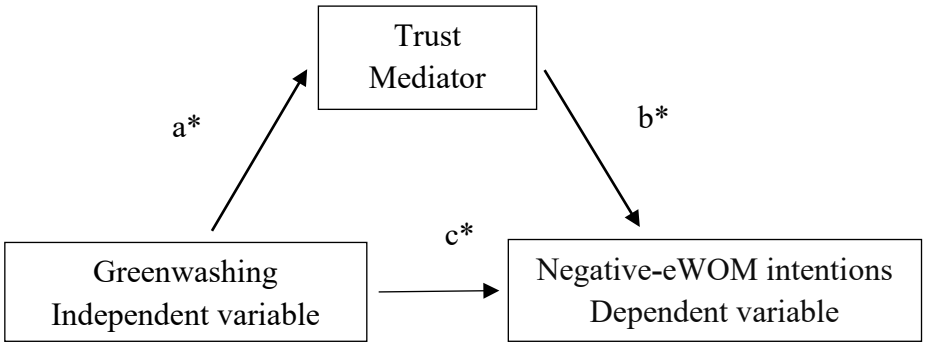
- The relationship between greenwashing and trust (a).

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to analyze the relationship between the dummy greenwashing variable and trust, a continuous dependent variable. The dummy non-greenwashing was not included in the analysis since there was no significant relationship with negative eWOM intentions. The model was found to be significant, $F(1, 285) = 11.6$, $p < .001$, $R2 = .04$. The results showed a significant relationship between greenwashing and trust. This means that greenwashing negatively influences trust ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .001$).

- The influence of both greenwashing and trust on negative eWOM (b+c).

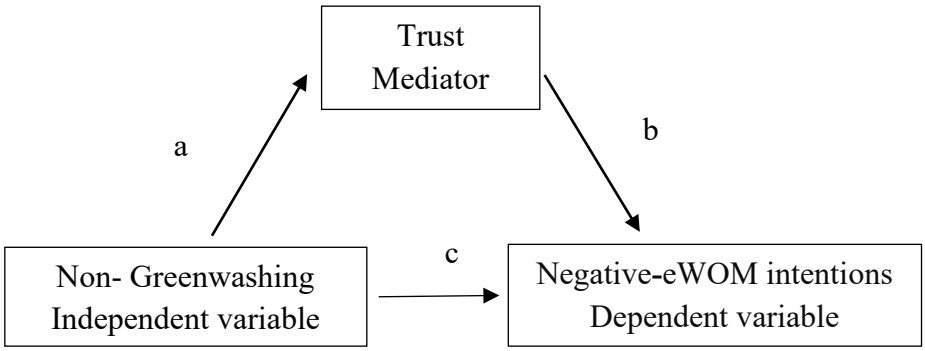
In hypothesis 4, it was stated that the effect of greenwashing on negative eWOM is mediated by trust. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to see whether there is a significant relationship between greenwashing and negative eWOM and trust and negative eWOM. Trust and the dummy greenwashing were the independent variables used as predictors, and negative eWOM was the dependent variable. Trust and negative eWOM are both continuous variables. The model was found to be significant, $F(2, 284) = 25.8$, $p < .001$. There was a significant relationship between trust and negative eWOM. Trust has a positive significant influence on negative eWOM ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$). The results also indicated that the effect of greenwashing on negative eWOM still exists but in a smaller magnitude ($\beta = .14$, $p = .012$) when trust is included in the regression. This means that trust partially

mediates the relationship between greenwashing and negative eWOM. Based on the results above, hypothesis 4 is supported.



*Note: * $p < .001$*

Figure 4.3.6.4 Significant and non-significant relationships in the model of negative eWOM



*Note: * $p < .001$*

Figure 4.3.6.5 Significant and non-significant relationships in the model of negative eWOM

5. Discussion

The ethical consumer market is growing fast, and the fashion industry adapted to the change of consumers' needs (Joergens, 2006). Fashion brands are trying to gain the interest of ordinary consumers by implementing green marketing techniques such

as launching new conscious collections. However, the exaggerated green claims of fashion companies made consumers skeptical about conscious garments, increasing greenwashing suspicion (Paço & Reis, 2012). Companies may engage in greenwashing in order to advertise environmentally sustainable products to consumers and initiate positive eWOM. According to research (Creyer and Ross, 1997), consumers will reward companies engaged in CSR activities and sanction those that do not work in sustainable manners. Trust plays a significant role in the relationship between eWOM and greenwash since it influences consumers' intentions to participate in eWOM. To find the relationship between these factors, an online experiment has been conducted to answer the following research question: "To what extent do fashion companies' greenwashing efforts impact consumers' intentions to engage in positive or negative eWOM?".

5.1 Key Findings

This research investigates the relationship between greenwashing and eWOM with trust as a possible mediator of this relationship. First, for hypothesis 1 (H1), it was expected that non-greenwashing information would lead to higher positive eWOM intentions than greenwashing information and the control group. The findings showed significant differences in the intention to participate in positive eWOM between the three conditions. Specifically, participants that received non-greenwashing information were significantly more likely to engage in positive eWOM. However, no significant relationship was found between greenwashing and the control condition with positive eWOM. These research findings comply with previous research results (Fatma et al., 2020; Liu & Keng, 2014), showing that CSR activities and strong environmental performance are associated with positive eWOM.

Second, Hypothesis 2 (H2) stated that participants that receive greenwashing information would have higher negative eWOM intentions than participants that receive non-greenwashing information and the control group. Based on the findings, participants that received greenwashing information were significantly more likely to engage in negative eWOM. However, no significant relationship was found between non-greenwashing and control conditions with negative eWOM. These findings comply with the results of previous researchers (Chen et al., 2014; Liu & Keng, 2014; Zhang et al., 2018), showing that greenwashing is strongly associated with negative eWOM.

Third, this study aimed to find a mediation effect of trust in the relationship between greenwashing and eWOM. The third hypothesis (H3) and fourth hypothesis (H4) focused on the relationship between greenwashing and trust. They were stated as follows: the effect of greenwashing on positive eWOM is mediated by trust; the effect of greenwashing on negative eWOM is mediated by trust. Both hypotheses were accepted. Specifically, for hypothesis 3 (H3), the results showed that greenwashing is not significantly related to positive eWOM. However, non-greenwashing and the control condition were. The mediation analysis included only the dummy non-greenwashing variable, trust, and positive eWOM and revealed that both the non-greenwashing and control group scored significantly high on trust. Specifically, a full mediation of trust was found for the relationship of non-greenwashing and positive eWOM.

Furthermore, for hypothesis 4 (H4), the results showed that non-greenwashing was not significantly related to negative eWOM. The mediation analysis included only the dummy greenwashing variable and showed that the greenwashing group scored significantly high on trust. Precisely, a partial mediation of trust was found for the relationship between greenwashing and negative eWOM.

These findings comply with previous ones (Chen & Chang, 2013; McKnight et al., 2004), which indicated that skepticism and negative eWOM could lead to distrust in an organization. Moreover, previous researchers (Du & Vieira, 2012; Fatma et al., 2020) found that a company's CSR engagement can positively impact its economic and social performance, leading to eWOM and trust increasement. The high scores of the control group also show interesting findings. Precisely, when respondents do not receive any background information about a company, they seem to be more positive about the post they see. This might have to do with the green perceived quality. According to Chen and Chang (2013), green perceived quality can differentiate a product from its competitors, deliver value to its customers and influence their perception about the brand's green identity. For example, creating a Facebook post about a sustainable fashion company increased the brand's perceived quality and led respondents to a more positive attitude. To answer the research question, green information and strong environmental performance can positively influence consumer perception about a brand, making them willing to engage in positive eWOM and further supporting actions. However, consumers will feel

deceived when a brand conveys ambiguous green information to gloss over bad behavior. Greenwashing can negatively affect consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the brand or organization, making them willing to engage in negative eWOM and other "punishing" actions.

5.2 Theoretical and practical implications

This study contributes to the existing literature and has several implications for practice that can help fashion industries to increase consumers' trust by genuinely investing in environmental measures and limit the risk of being accused of greenwashing. The current research investigated the relationship between greenwashing, trust, and eWOM intentions. Of theoretical concern, this study connects the greenwashing perspective on eWOM intentions combined with research on the influence of trust in this relationship. Despite the plethora of research in this area, the combination of all these topics concerning the fashion industry is something not previously explored. Specifically, there is quite a bit of research on greenwashing and trust but not in relation to the fashion industry.

According to the existing literature (Chen et al., 2019; Chen & Chang, 2013), greenwashing can diminish trust. But what are greenwashing effects on consumer's trust when it comes to the fashion industry? How are fashion consumers reacting when it comes to trusting a green fashion brand? Greenwashing is something that fashion brands are doing to inflate their sustainable image, while they are part of the main problem. Although corporate greenwashing is a widespread phenomenon, few studies have investigated its effects on consumers. This research provides interesting new insights into the relationship between greenwashing and trust by focusing on consumer's perceptions and reactions.

Based on the findings, on the one hand, having a strong environmental performance (non-greenwashing) is associated with positive eWOM and trust build, while on the other hand, greenwashing is strongly connected with negative eWOM and trust loss. Specifically, the participants assigned to the greenwashing conditions were more likely to participate in negative eWOM than the participants assigned in the non-greenwashing condition who were more likely to participate in positive eWOM. These findings support earlier studies (Lee & Hong, 2016; Liu & Keng, 2014). The findings in this study suggest that practitioners should focus their managerial attention on sustainability and promote it through their positioning

strategies with transparency. CSR activities can lead to positive eWOM and increase consumer's trust. High levels of trust can enhance brand loyalty and create advocacy(Chen & Chang, 2013). Being a loyal customer is highly important nowadays, that most fashion brands were affected by the pandemic. However, firms need to monitor online communication because when their CSR activities are not aligned with their business core, consumers may engage in negative eWOM and "punish" the brand by creating a virtual boycott (Eberle et al., 2013). Negative eWOM is more influential than positive eWOM and has a detrimental impact on a company's reputation and performance (Eberle et al., 2013).

The practical implications of this study contribute to the marketing strategies of the marketers of apparel brands and benefit the fashion industry by providing a clear overview of both consumers' perception and reaction to CSR activities and greenwashing. Most importantly, marketers should pay attention to incorporating terms and eco-labels such as "organic," "conscious," and "eco-friendly" because when they do not include explicit information about the product, they appear to be misleading and raise greenwashing concerns. Given that FTC provides clear regulations about eco-label incorporation in its green marketing guide (*Green Guides*, 2018), it was evident that transparent companies with legitimate green claims about the environmentally friendly nature of their products can benefit by avoiding fines. Also, they can increase consumers' trust by being perceived as a brand with high ethical standards. Furthermore, practitioners can also consider the relation between fashion and sustainability and try to minimize mass production. The fashion industry should incorporate more sustainable operating methods such as upcycling or donating, which are some of the most environmentally friendly ways of dealing with old or unsold garments (Bae, 2019). In this way, fashion brands will be able to report their corporate environmental performance and avoid the risk of being connected to greenwashing and its hazardous results (negative eWOM, complaining, boycotting).

5.3 Limitations

By investigating the impact of the fashion industry's greenwashing in eWOM and how trust mediates this relationship, this research contributed to the already existing literature on greenwashing, eWOM and trust. However, this research had several limitations that influenced its results.

First, a limitation of this research is that the data gathering happened through the springtime of 2021. In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 pandemic. Some form of lockdown was announced in most countries, and people had to comply with severe social distancing rules. This had an impact on people's well-being and changed their mindset about sustainability. According to the BBC (2021), COVID-19 created an ethical and environmental consumer revolution. Consumers reconsidered their values, and their ethical concerns became stronger than ever. The pandemic situation might have influenced respondents' answers to this experiment since consumers have become less resistant to the company's greenwashing techniques. Through social media, they gained the power to punish them, influencing consumers' responses towards a company's greenwashing actions.

Second, this research used only a mediator and not a moderator. Moderators can influence the level, direction, and strength of a relationship between variables (Bryman, 2016). This means that a moderator can change the size of the effect of the treatment. Including environmental concerns as a moderator could have provided valuable information about the profile of consumers who would be more willing to engage in eWOM. Previous research (Cheung & To, 2020) proved that it might be possible that environmentally concerned consumers would be more inclined to engage in word of mouth than the ones that do not have strong ethical beliefs. Moderators can lead to difficulties in interpreting and replicating an experiment and increasing external validity threats. However, in this research, they could have provided better insights into consumers' intentions to participate in eWOM.

Third, due to the new COVID-19 online reality, a non-probability convenience sample was used since it was impossible to gather respondents and collect their answers with a real-life Facebook stimulus. A less varied sample can lead to low levels of credibility and make results hard to generalize (Bryman, 20). Specifically, the research was distributed through the researcher's network, making the results vulnerable to selection bias (Neuman, 2014). This means that most respondents were gathered through the researchers' network and mainly through Facebook. However, since many people and colleagues reshared the research in different Facebook and LinkedIn pages, the study managed to preserve a high credibility level for the results.

5.4 Directions for future research

The issue of sustainability is crucial in the fashion industry and has attracted significant attention from consumers. However, although sustainable fashion has been widely discussed in the last decades and many academics have focused on how sustainable fashion can be developed, there is limited research on consumers' responses towards ethical fashion. Specifically, previous studies have widely explored word of mouth (wom) and eWOM, but the relationship between eWOM and fashion consumers has been neglected as a research topic. Furthermore, even though the fashion industry is one of the most polluting industries and uses misleading green marketing techniques, limited studies explored the impact of the fashion industry's greenwashing on its consumers. Therefore, based on these research findings and limitations, future research is proposed in the following section.

First, this research focused on respondents' eWOM intentions after reading a Facebook post about a fictitious fashion company. Afterward, the questions focused directly on trust and whether participants will be willing to share something positive or negative. Further research should also focus on the role of moral emotions and their influence on consumers' responses to its green and non-green actions. Moral emotions can influence consumers' willingness to participate in eWOM and provide a clear image of consumers' interpretation of a company's CSR activities (Xie et al., 2015). The acknowledgment of this topic influences consumers' eWOM intentions. For future research, moral intentions could be included as a moderator in the experiment.

Second, the sample used in this study can be characterized as homogenous in terms of income level (68.6 had an income between 0-24.999) and age (18.8 were 25 years of age). This study gave insight regarding the behavior of young Facebook users that might have influenced their intentions to participate in eWOM since older people are less likely to share their feelings and experiences online, especially when it comes to their consumption habits (Kanchanapibul et al., 2014). However, future research could focus on elderly respondents because research has shown that when age increases, trust also increases (Li & Fung, 2013). Previous research (Buttel, 1979) has also proved that older people tend to have higher environmental concerns. With a more age-inclusive sample, the influence of age on trust and eWOM intentions could have been better explored.

Third, this research focused on consumers' intentions to participate in eWOM, the influence of greenwashing, and the mediating role of trust. Greenwashing was an independent variable with three conditions (non-greenwashing and the control condition). This research mainly focused on the influence of greenwashing in both positive and negative eWOM. Future research could address the impact of greenwashing on fashion consumers' purchase intentions. According to the literature (Delieva & Eom, 2019; Wolny & Mueller, 2013; Yan et al., 2012), there is an attitude-behavior gap in consumers' ethical beliefs and purchase intentions, meaning that ethical consumers rarely purchase sustainable products. In addition, H&M and Zara are two of the leading fast-fashion industries in the world right now, even though their misleading techniques are widely known.

Furthermore, including purchase intentions as an independent variable could provide more information about the influence of eWOM in the consumer making-decision process. According to Berger (2013), word of mouth is the primary factor behind 50% of purchase decisions and is ten times more effective than advertising. Based on these findings, it will be necessary to explore further the influence of greenwashing and the effects of eWOM on fashion consumers' purchase intentions.

6. Conclusion

Given the recent global focus on ethics and sustainability, the fashion industry applied these concepts in its clothing manufacturing and changed its operating model. Engagement in CSR activities, especially those related to the environment, could enhance the fashion industry's brand image and satisfy consumers' green needs and demands. However, many consumers see barriers to the acceptance of sustainably produced products, and they become skeptical when it comes to their purchases because of the rise of greenwashing. Although society tries to deter greenwashing behaviors, greenwash still dominates the market, being the main obstacle to green marketing's development. Social media supported society's effort to prevent greenwash by giving consumers the chance to spread the word between organizations and consumers.

This study builds up a research model to explore the influence of greenwash on eWOM and discuss the mediation effects of trust. This research can serve as an inspiration to marketers and the fashion industry to prevent irresponsible behaviors. If brands claim to be sustainable, they should be engaged in green strategies to avoid

negative eWOM and enhance positive eWOM. Moreover, the insights of this study contributed to previous research as the relationship between greenwashing and eWOM was explored further. This topic could be studied further. Therefore, directions for future studies were given about the importance of the moral emotions of the respondents when it comes to greenwashing. Also, future studies could further examine the influence of CSR on positive eWOM and participants' intentions to spread positive information about a sustainable company.

To sum up, the current study demonstrated that higher levels of non-greenwashing activities promote stronger positive eWOM intentions about sustainable fashion. Conversely, higher levels of greenwashing activities promote stronger negative eWOM intentions. Additionally, non-greenwashing influences trust, so that non-greenwashing behavior leads to higher levels of trust than greenwashing. This means that higher levels of trust promote stronger positive eWOM intentions about sustainable fashion. Thus, trust fully mediates the relationship between non-greenwashing behavior and positive eWOM. However, trust partially mediates the relationship between greenwashing behavior and negative eWOM. These results indicate how important it is for the fashion industry to truly engage in green actions and avoid greenwashing behavior as it can influence consumers' trust, which can affect their social media behavior.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Table 5: Items that are combined in the variables and the sources they are retrieved from.

Variable/construct	Question	Source
Environmental concerns	I prefer to buy products from sustainable companies. I prefer buying products with an eco-label. I prefer to buy in shops that highlight ecological or organic products. I prefer to do my shopping in stores that promote fair trade. I restrict my consumption (food, energy, clothing, etc.) to what I really need.	Toti, & Moulins, (2016).
Manipulation check	34-Threads is a sustainable company.	No source.
Morality	Sincerity of the fashion company. Honesty of the fashion company. Trustworthiness of the fashion company.	Leach et al. (2007).
Competence	Competence of the fashion company. Intelligence of the fashion company. Skillfulness of the fashion company.	Leach et al. (2007).
Positive eWOM	I would give a positive reaction under the post.	Eisingerich, et al. (2015).

	I would say positive things about the company on Facebook. I would start to follow the Facebook page of the company. I would "like" this post on Facebook. I would share this post with friends. I would recommend the clothes of this company to friends.	
Negative eWOM	I would be willing to say negative things about the company on Facebook. I would share the post with friends to express negative feelings. I would give a negative reaction under the post. I would say negative things about the fashion products they deliver to their customers.	Eisingerich et al. (2015).
Demographics	Gender Age Income	No source
Population check	Age Facebook account	No Source

Appendix B

Christina MA thesis

Introduction

Dear participant,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. This research is carried out by a Media & Business master student at Erasmus University Rotterdam. The questions are about your opinions on the fashion industries' sustainable practices and social media activities. Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary, which means that you can stop the questionnaire at any time by closing your browser.

Your answers to the questions will be processed anonymously, and the results of this survey will only be used for the aforementioned research. Please read the questions carefully and click on the answer that best reflects your opinion. There are no right or wrong answers. Completing the questionnaire will take approximately 6 minutes of your time. For the questions or comments, please email to: 576640cg@student.eur.nl.

Environmental Concerns

Please answer the following questions about your environmental concerns.

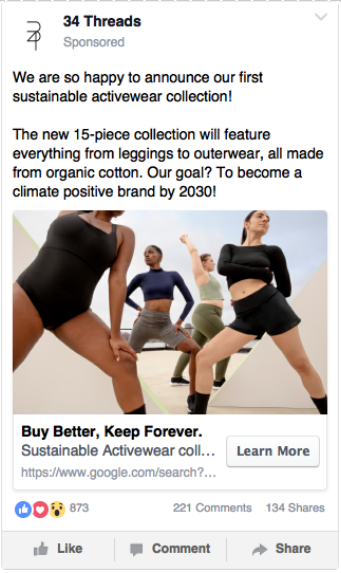
Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
I prefer to buy products from sustainable companies. (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I prefer buying products with an eco-label. (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I prefer to buy in shops that highlight ecological or organic products. (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

I prefer to do my shopping in stores that promote fair trade. (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I restrict my consumption (food, energy, clothing, etc.) to what I really need. (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Control Condition

Please carefully look at the Facebook post from the fashion company "34 Threads" on the next page.



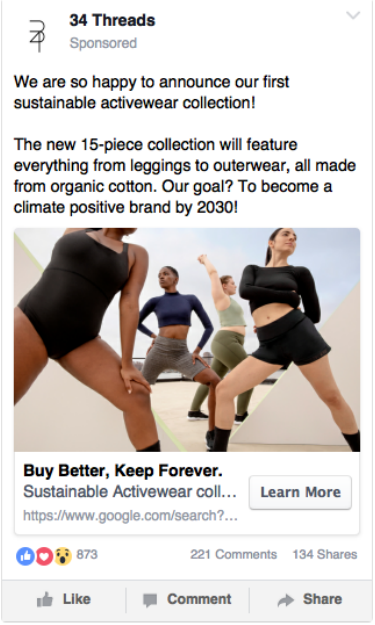
Greenwashing Condition

Please read the text below carefully.

In 2020, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) conducted a study about fashion brands that truly are sustainable. The agency has investigated thousands of misleading green labeling cases and works hard to ferret out and shut down offenders. It is no secret that consumers want environmentally friendly products and that companies are trying to meet that need. Many consumers buy products with "green" or "eco-friendly" labels that indicate the materials' source. Sometimes these labels can prove to be quite misleading. For instance, H&M launched a more sustainable "Conscious Collection" and used green labels. The collection used more sustainable materials but blended them with other fabrics to keep the prices low. Fabric blends cannot be recycled, a fact which contradicts the brands' whole recycling campaign.

On the next page, you will see a Facebook message from a fashion company named "34 Threads". The FTC study proved that this company scores **low** on sustainability. The company does not use certified green claims and does not have clear green commitments. The green labels they use verify that the collection meets the lowest environmental quality and performance standards under the international guidelines for environmental labeling programs, ISO 14020 and 14024.

Please carefully look at the Facebook post from the fashion company "34 Threads" on the next page.



Non-Greenwashing Condition

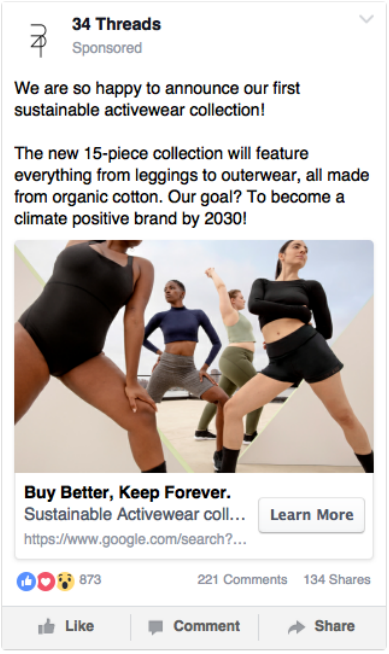
Please read the text below carefully.

In 2020, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) conducted a study about fashion brands that truly are sustainable. The agency has investigated thousands of misleading green labeling cases and works hard to ferret out and shut down offenders. It is no secret that consumers want environmentally friendly products and that companies are trying to meet that need. Many consumers buy products with "green" or "eco-friendly" labels that indicate the materials' source. Sometimes these labels can prove to be quite misleading. For instance, H&M launched a more sustainable "Conscious Collection" and used green labels. The collection used more sustainable materials but blended them with other fabrics to keep the prices low. Fabric blends cannot be recycled, a fact which contradicts the brands' whole recycling campaign.

On the next page, you will see a Facebook message from a fashion company named "34 Threads". The FTC study proved that this company scores **high** on sustainability. The company uses certified green claims and has clear green commitments. The green labels they use verify that the collection meets the

highest environmental quality and performance standards under the international guidelines for environmental labeling programs, ISO 14020 and 14024.

Please carefully look at the Facebook post from the fashion company "34 Threads" on the next page.



Manipulation Check

Thank you for reading this Facebook post. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

34 Threads is a sustainable fashion company.

- ○ Strongly disagree (1)
- ○ Disagree (2)
- ○ Some
- ○ what disagree (3)
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- ○ Somewhat agree (5)
- ○ Agree (6)
- ○ Strongly agree (7)

Trust

Morality

Your assessment of the organization's morality. How do you estimate the following characteristics of the fashion company?

	Very low (1)	Low (2)	Slightly low (3)	Neither low nor high (4)	Slightly high (5)	High (6)	Very high (7)
Honesty (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Sincerity (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Trustworthiness (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Competence

Your assessment of the organization's competence. How do you estimate the following characteristics of the fashion company?

	Very low (1)	Low (2)	Slightly low (3)	Neither low nor high (4)	Slightly high (5)	High (6)	Very high (7)
Competence (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Intelligence (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Skillfulness (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

eWOM

Positive eWOM

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements concerning the Facebook post you saw before.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
I would "like" this post on Facebook. (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would give a positive reaction under the post. (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would share this post with friends. (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would say positive things about the company on Facebook. (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

I would recommend the clothes of this company to friends. (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would start to follow the Facebook page of the company. (6)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Negative eWOM

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements concerning the Facebook post you saw before.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
I would give a negative reaction under the post. (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would share the post with friends to express negative feelings about it. (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would be willing to say negative things about the company on Facebook. (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

I would say negative things about the fashion products they deliver to their customers. (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Page Break

Age

What is your age?

_____

Facebook account

Do you currently have a Facebook account?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

Facebook Usage

If yes, how often do you use it?

- ○ Very infrequently (1)
- ○ Somewhat infrequently (2)
- ○ Occasionally (3)
- ○ Somewhat frequently (4)
- ○ Very frequently (5)

Gender

Please indicate your gender.

- ○ Male (1)
- ○ Female (2)
- ○ Other (3)
- ○ Prefer not to say (4)

Income

Which of the options below best describes your personal income over the past year?

- ○ €0 to €24.999 (1)
- ○ €25.000 to €49.999 (2)
- ○ €50.000 to €74.999 (3)
- ○ €75.000 to €99.999 (4)
- ○ €100.000 to €124.999 (5)
- ○ €125.000 to €149.999 (6)
- ○ I don't know (7)
- ○ Prefer not to say (8)

Thank you message.

You have come to the end of the questionnaire. In this survey, we were interested in your opinion on the fashion industries' sustainable practices. A fictitious fashion company has been used to avoid that a company's reputation might influenc

your opinion. We have also referred to an investigation by the FTC. The complete investigation report of the FTC can be found here: https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/media-resources/truth-advertising/green-guides Thank you for your participation! If you have any questions about the study, please contact us by email to576640cg@student.eur.nl. You can send your answers by clicking on the arrow button.