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Topic

**Consumer Perceptions of Greenwashing and Trust in Sustainability
Marketing by UK Fast-Fashion Brands**

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Declaration

I declare I have prepared this dissertation, entitled “Consumer Perceptions of Greenwashing and Trust in Sustainability Marketing by UK Fast-Fashion Brands: A Qualitative Study Using Thematic Analysis”, independently and that it contains nothing plagiarized or copied from any other sources. Inappropriate references/repetition of sources have been avoided. Data from the research have been obtained, analyzed and it is my sole responsibility for final interpretation, findings, and conclusions.

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Date: 23.09.2026

AI Use Acknowledgement

This dissertation was prepared with a restricted use of ChatGPT by OpenAI. It was used to help with structuring sections, planning research, ideas for literature searching, grammar correction, clarifying ideas for academic discussions and structuring ideas. Participants were not fabricated, responses to interviews, data or research findings were not manipulated using AI. The researcher has reviewed, edited and verified all AI-generated content prior to adding it to the dissertation.

Some of the prompts used are:

“Correct the grammar and clarity of the paragraph.”

“Assist in organizing this section around the research question(s) and results.”

“Suggest relevant areas of literature to explore for greenwashing, consumer trust and sustainability marketing.”

The researcher was solely responsible for the analysis, interpretation and published material submitted to the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David.

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates how fast-fashion consumers understand sustainability marketing messages, how consumers develop a sense of greenwashing and the impact this has on their trust and buying decisions. This study took a qualitative interpretivist approach and used semi-structured interview questions to gain information from 15 purposively selected UK fast-fashion consumers. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data, which yielded seven themes concerning sustainability interpretation, credibility, greenwashing cues, brand-level and consumer-level influences, erosion of trust, behavioural responses, and trust recovery. The results reveal that consumers do not evaluate the sustainability claims on their own. Instead, they assess the specificity, clarity and verifiability and accessibility of evidence in addition to previous brand experiences, broader business practices, social media information and practical shopping factors. Perceptions of greenwashing tended to be more likely to arise when claims were ambiguous, selective, poorly substantiated or inconsistent with broader brand actions. The results also show that lack of trust does not always lead to purchase avoidance, and that other factors like price, convenience, style and product need can still play a role in the purchasing decision. The study combines Signalling Theory and the Persuasion Knowledge Model, giving consumers a double evaluation: they evaluate the quality of the sustainability signal and the perceived motivation that the sender is defending by using this signal. The study adds to the knowledge of greenwashing as an iterative and contextual process which influences consumer purchasing behavior as well as scepticism, loyalty and the persuasive power of future sustainability communication. The results underscore the need for transparency, accessibility, verifiability, and sustained supporting sustainability claims, to both sustain and restore consumer trust.

Keywords: greenwashing, sustainability marketing, consumer trust, fast fashion, Signalling Theory, Persuasion Knowledge Model, thematic analysis, UK consumers.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The fast-fashion industry is built around rapid production cycles, frequent changes in clothing styles and the availability of fashionable products at relatively low prices. Although this business model has increased access to affordable clothing, it has also been widely associated with environmental and social harm across the textile supply chain. These concerns include intensive resource use, waste generation, pollution and the wider consequences of short product life cycles. In the United Kingdom, consumers are becoming increasingly aware of these impacts and are paying greater attention to the environmental claims made by fashion brands (Zhang, Zhang and Zhou, 2021).

In response to growing criticism, many UK fast-fashion brands have increased their use of sustainability marketing. Environmental messages are communicated through corporate websites, product labels, advertising campaigns, social media posts and other forms of brand communication. Such messages commonly refer to recycled materials, reduced emissions, ethical sourcing, sustainable collections and responsible production. Sustainability communication allows brands to present themselves as environmentally responsible, appeal to environmentally conscious consumers and differentiate themselves in a highly competitive market (de Jong, Harkink and Barth, 2018).

However, the increasing visibility of sustainability claims has also created greater consumer scepticism. Consumers may question whether a brand's environmental claims reflect meaningful changes in business practice or are mainly designed to improve its public image. Claims may be viewed as unreliable when they are vague, exaggerated, selective, unsupported by evidence or inconsistent with the wider activities of the company. Greenwashing broadly refers to a difference between the environmental image communicated by an organisation and its actual environmental performance (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). It may occur at organisational or product level and may involve misleading wording, unclear labels, selective disclosure or visual imagery that creates an environmentally responsible impression without sufficient supporting evidence.

Greenwashing is particularly relevant to fast fashion because the sector's basic model of high-volume production, low prices and rapidly changing collections may appear inconsistent with

claims of sustainability. Consequently, consumers may experience difficulty deciding which environmental messages are credible. Existing studies indicate that perceived greenwashing can create confusion, increase perceived risk and weaken green brand trust (Chen and Chang, 2013). Research within clothing markets also suggests that perceived greenwashing contributes to scepticism towards brands and reduces confidence in their sustainability communication (Policarpo et al., 2023).

1.2 Research Problem and Gap

UK fast-fashion brands actively promote sustainability through marketing, yet consumers increasingly question the authenticity of these claims. This creates a significant marketing problem. Sustainability communication is intended to build trust and demonstrate responsibility; however, when consumers perceive the communication as manipulative, incomplete or self-interested, it may have the opposite effect. Instead of strengthening the relationship between consumers and brands, suspected greenwashing may undermine trust, increase scepticism and reduce purchase intention (Chen and Chang, 2013; Policarpo et al., 2023).

The problem is intensified by the difficulty consumers face in verifying environmental claims. Most consumers cannot directly inspect supply chains, production conditions, emissions data or material-sourcing practices. They must therefore make judgements using the information presented by the brand. Ambiguous expressions, unsupported claims, selective emphasis and unclear sustainability labels may prevent marketing messages from being accepted as credible. In fast-fashion communication, greenwashing has been linked to limited disclosure and the use of unclear environmental labelling, which may produce favourable impressions without providing sufficient evidence (Diaz-Bustamante-Ventisca et al., 2024).

A further issue concerns the effect of these perceptions on consumer behaviour. Previous research suggests that perceived greenwashing can weaken green brand image, satisfaction, trust and brand equity (Ha, 2022). It can also influence purchase intention by disrupting the trust-based relationship through which sustainability marketing is expected to affect consumer choice (Do et al., 2025). Nevertheless, knowledge of the interpretive process through which consumers form these judgements remains limited.

The existing literature is predominantly quantitative and survey-based. Many studies examine perceived greenwashing, trust and purchase intention through statistical relationships or structural

models (Policarpo et al., 2023; Do et al., 2025). Although this research demonstrates important associations, it provides less insight into how consumers interpret particular sustainability messages, which cues create suspicion and how previous experiences influence their responses. There is limited qualitative research focusing specifically on UK fast-fashion consumers and their own explanations of sustainability claims (Hatley, 2021). This study addresses that gap through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, allowing consumers to explain how they recognise possible greenwashing and how these perceptions influence their trust, skepticism and purchase attitudes.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is academically significant because it contributes to research on greenwashing, sustainability marketing and consumer behaviour. Much of the existing literature has established relationships between perceived greenwashing, trust and behavioural intention through quantitative methods. A qualitative investigation can add depth by examining the meanings, reasoning and experiences behind those relationships. It therefore responds to the need for a more detailed understanding of how consumers react to different forms and degrees of environmental communication (de Jong, Huluba and Beldad, 2020).

The study is also relevant to the fast-fashion context. Sustainability claims in this sector are often judged against a business model associated with rapid production and consumption. Exploring how UK consumers interpret these claims may identify the specific words, labels, evidence, images or inconsistencies that cause suspicion. These findings may help explain why some messages are considered credible while others are classified as greenwashing.

Practically, the findings may assist fast-fashion retailers, sustainability teams and marketing managers in developing clearer, more transparent and more believable communication. Greater understanding of consumer expectations may help brands reduce vague claims, provide stronger evidence and avoid communication practices that produce consumer backlash (Persakis et al., 2025).

1.4 Research Aim

To explore how UK fast-fashion consumers perceive sustainability marketing claims and how perceived greenwashing influences their brand trust, scepticism and purchase attitudes.

1.5 Research Objectives

1. To examine how UK consumers interpret sustainability claims made by fast-fashion brands through websites, labels and social media.
2. To identify the key factors that lead consumers to perceive fast-fashion sustainability messages as greenwashing.
3. To analyse how perceived greenwashing affects consumer trust, brand scepticism and future purchase intention.

1.6 Research Questions

1. How do UK fast-fashion consumers interpret sustainability claims made by fashion brands?
2. What factors lead consumers to perceive fast-fashion sustainability marketing as greenwashing?
3. How does perceived greenwashing influence consumer trust and purchase intention?

1.7 Scope of the Study

The study focused on consumers of fast-fashion clothing who are based in the United Kingdom. It examined their perceptions of sustainability claims communicated through brand websites, product labels and social media. The research was concerned specifically with how consumers interpret these claims, what makes them suspect greenwashing and how such perceptions affect trust, scepticism and purchase intention.

The study adopted a theory-informed abductive qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm. Primary data were collected through online semi-structured interviews with 15 purposively selected participants. Eligible participants were aged 18 or above, reside in the UK, purchase fast-fashion clothing at least once a month and be able to discuss sustainability marketing claims. The interview data were analysed thematically.

The study did not attempt to measure the prevalence of greenwashing, audit the environmental performance of particular brands or produce statistically generalisable conclusions. It was limited to the experiences and interpretations of the selected participants rather than representing all UK consumers. Its purpose was to develop an in-depth understanding of consumer interpretations within the selected UK fast-fashion context.

1.8 Dissertation Structure

The dissertation consists of five chapters.

Chapter One: Introduction introduces the study by presenting its background, research problem and gap, significance, aim, objectives, research questions, scope and overall dissertation structure.

Chapter Two: Literature Review reviews the relevant literature on fast fashion, green marketing, greenwashing, consumer perception, trust, scepticism, purchase intention and consumer behaviour. It also presents the theoretical perspectives informing the interpretation of the study.

Chapter Three: Methodology explains the research philosophy, qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews, sampling strategy, participant criteria, data-collection procedure, thematic analysis, research trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis presents the themes developed from the interview data. It analyses how participants interpret sustainability claims, identify possible greenwashing and describe its influence on their trust, scepticism and purchase attitudes.

Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations summarises the main findings, answers the research questions and discusses the contribution and limitations of the study. It also offers recommendations for fast-fashion brands, marketing practitioners and future researchers.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically reviews the existing literature for insights regarding consumer perceptions of what sustainability claims by fast-fashion brands mean and how this influence perceptions of greenwashing and consumer behaviour. The results of the studies conducted in the field of greenwashing have been found to be different across the countries, industries, types of claims, and the design of the studies (Akturan, 2018; de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). The review does not show sustainability marketing as a stand-alone topic but it pursues an interpretative sequence: when brands communicate sustainability information; when consumers evaluate the information both as a signal and as a persuasive one; when perceived greenwashing arises; when consumer trust is impacted, along with their distrust and market reactions. Signalling Theory is used to describe how consumers process information when they have difficulty determining its credibility in an environment with information asymmetry, while the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) is used to describe how consumers process the message and how they think it was created (Friestad and Wright, 1994; Connelly et al., 2011).

2.2 Fast Fashion, Sustainability Claims and the UK Context

The key elements of fast fashion are high frequency of use, low price, trendiness and quick turnaround. As such, sustainability communication takes place within a structural tension: on one hand, brands talk about improving the environment, and on the other, they make money in a volume- and speed-based business model. Brydges, Henninger and Hanlon (2022) illustrates how fashion brands portray sustainability in different media, whether it be reports, websites, social media or the store environment. Claims will probably be evaluated based on the overall business model, not as product information in isolation (Munir and Mohan, 2022; Diaz-Bustamante-Ventisca et al., 2025).

UK research has also found that there is a disconnect between concern and action, though with varying motivations. In the study by Zhang, Zhang and Zhou (2021), there was a greater level of concern than behavioural commitment in the UK respondents with regard to cognition and affect. Ethical values are also found to affect purchase intention, but are in competition with product attributes and situational factors (Stringer, Mortimer and Payne, 2020). The survey designs used to establish associations between attitudes and intentions offer little evidence of how consumer

perceptions of individual sustainability claims relate. Ritch's (2022) extensive interviews reveal more depth as he demonstrates that words used to indicate sustainability in garment labelling could engender scepticism and misunderstanding. The study was conducted with 28 professionally working mothers in Edinburgh, however, this has limited demographic and geographical transferability. The contrast highlights the need for the two types of evidence to be considered complementary rather than interchangeable.

UK fast-fashion consumers are important because they are likely to come across a lot of sustainability information when making decisions about brands whose business practices can seem at odds with sustainability. In the UK context there is also a visible regulatory concern regarding green claims which are not clear or supported. The CMA obtained commitments from ASOS, Boohoo and George at Asda on environmental marketing (CMA, 2024). Regulatory action establishes the importance of credibility, but it fails to account for how normal consumers perceive, interpret and react to questions claims. Research that has already been conducted in the UK has focused more on attitudes, terminology and intention to purchase, rather than on the whole process of received information, acceptance of the information, perceived greenwashing and trust (Ritch, 2022).

2.3 Conceptualising Perceived Greenwashing

Greenwashing can be generally defined as communication making an impression on the environment that is favorable, but not warranted by the practices of the organisation. Can be in the form of false claims, unclear language, selective disclosure, irrelevant claims, unsupported comparisons and/or nature-based imagery (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Schmuck, Matthes and Naderer, 2018; Santos, Coelho and Marques, 2024). Perceived greenwashing in this study is defined as a consumer opinion that the sustainability claim made by fast fashion brands is either exaggerated, selective, unsupported, misleading or inconsistent with the brand's actions. This perceptual emphasis is required since consumers usually don't have complete information regarding materials, emissions, factories, or the supply chain. From the cues they can see, from what they know of the brand and from what evidence they have, they draw their inferences and make a judgment about credibility. The study goes no further than to explore what constitutes judgement by consumers that a claim might be greenwashing, and what follows from that judgement.

There is no evidence in the literature that all types of greenwashing elicit the same response. Vague claims were more difficult to detect than false claims, but nature imagery might have positive affective outcomes (Schmuck, Matthes and Naderer, 2018). Selective promotion and lack of transparency were, on the other hand, found to be major warning signs by Munir and Mohan (2022) in their qualitative fashion study. This difference is partly methodological as the findings of half-lies and complete lies are comparable and both had negative effects on the reputation once the discrepancies were revealed, while Wang and Jung (2025) found that the effects were different for hypocrisy and responses to complaints in connection with the different kinds of false labels, vague information and minimised impacts. The findings indicate that reactions are not only influenced by claim form, but also corrective information, perceived intention, brand context and the measure of the outcome.

2.4 Consumer Evaluation of Received Sustainability Information

Information about sustainability from a brand is not a consumer perception itself. Consumer consumption of information is meaningful when they evaluate it. The relevant perceptions are claim clarity, specificity, evidential adequacy, transparency, authenticity, verifiability and consistency with brand behaviour. These are not the same but are connected: a claim may be easy to understand but not substantiated or it may have a lot of information but be hard to verify. Consumer evaluation thus bridges the brand perspective with the consumer perspective. Labels, websites, social media posts, advertisements, certifications and reports are the mediums through which information is transmitted by the brand, while perceived credibility and authenticity is the interpretation by the consumer (Szabo and Webster, 2021).

A study by de Jong, Harkink and Barth (2018) showed that the impression created by communication may be favourable on the surface, but have a less favourable credibility judgement at deeper levels if the communication is greenwashing. Therefore, an honest claim can be successfully provided without a green association. The findings of Szabo and Webster (2021) suggest that interaction with the website had an impact on the perception of the environment, product perception and affective responses, and that digital presentation is a factor that influences evaluation. But if evidence is lacking, then it's design that must take the brunt of the burden in order to be attractive, and if imagery is greater than substantiation, then it could exacerbate suspicion. The information quantity and information usefulness are not the same as suggested by

Ritch (2022), as some terms related to sustainability could be misinterpreted. These studies demonstrate that the consumer's reaction to a claim depends not only on the content but also on the way the claim is presented, and on the basis for the claim.

2.5 Why Perceptions Differ: Claim, Brand and Consumer Conditions

Perceptions of greenwashing are a result of the interaction between three conditions: claim-related conditions, brand-related conditions, and consumer-related conditions. Vague language, unsupported comparisons, selective disclosure, missing data and ambiguous labels are all cues that can be claimed and are considered claim-related (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Schmuck, Matthes and Naderer, 2018). Brand cues are brand reputation, controversies with the brand in the past, consistency of communication and conduct, and whether sustainability is integrated throughout operations or in a selected group of operations (Munir and Mohan, 2022; Roozen, Raedts and Henderix, 2025). Consumer-related conditions are environmental knowledge, prior experience, marketing literacy, cynicism and involvement with fashion, according to Timmons, Whelan and Kelly (2024) and Policarpo et al. (2023). The checklist approach is therefore not enough, as the same word might be allowed, challenged or denied by the communicator, the evidence given with it, and the consumer's prior knowledge.

The differences between the studies can be attributed to brand strategy and context. Roozen, Raedts and Henderix (2025) found that the impact of greenwashing is particularly strong for the purchase intention when the sustainable fashion line is offered under a new brand name, indicating that brand architecture influences expectations and credibility of the brand. The Spanish consumers, however, tended to understand the fast-fashion sustainability communication as an image improvement (Diaz-Bustamante-Ventisca et al., 2025), and the Chinese consumers differed in their reactions due to the different types of greenwashing (Wang and Jung, 2025). The researchers Munir and Mohan (2022) highlighted transparency and uniformity to business practice in their UAE consumers' study. The results of these studies can be used to identify mechanisms that are relevant, but cannot be applied unqualified to the UK as the context of regulation, media coverage, brand recognition and sustainable-fashion attitudes vary between markets.

Consumer dispositions can even give rise to seemingly paradoxical results. In the study of Ulusoy and Barretta (2016), it was determined that consumers who are environmentally concerned could be interested in green products, but not in environmental claims of the brands. Policarpo et al.,

(2023) concluded that social cynicism undermined confidence by fueling perceptions of greenwashing. According to Isac et al (2025), the environmental knowledge had a positive reinforcement effect on the negative effect of greenwashing on purchase intention and Timmons, Whelan and Kelly (2024) revealed that targeted education enhanced the effect of environmental knowledge on the recognition of the misleading claims. Attraction to sustainability and scrutiny of corporate agendas may in turn grow due to environmental concern and knowledge. This two-way relationship is what makes it difficult for highly concerned consumers to be more trusting and for low-concern consumers to be more greenwashing resistant. Qualitative comparison is required to discover varied reasoning paths and not assume the one standard consumer response.

2.6 Trust as the Central Outcome and Its Behavioural Consequences

Trust is in the middle, as most of the environmental attributes of clothing cannot be checked directly by consumers. Green brand trust can be defined as the consumer's confidence in the brand's content of the message, ability to deliver on its environmental promises and consistency in its actions (Neumann, Martinez and Martinez, 2021; Isac et al., 2025). The credibility and trust in a brand should however be separated. A distinction between these two processes can be supported from the study of de Jong, Harkink and Barth (2018) who demonstrate that the impression of sustainability and the perceived integrity of the communication process do not necessarily go hand in hand. Therefore, trust outcomes should be looked at at the claim and brand level.

There is consensus on the adverse effect of greenwashing, though the roads taken to this conclusion vary. Akturan (2018) relates the concepts of greenwashing with brand credibility reduction, green brand association, green brand equity and green brand purchase intention. Neumann, Martinez and Martinez (2021) place trust in the middle of perceived sustainability efforts and purchase intention. Isac et al. (2025) find green brand trust to be a buffer that mitigates the purchase intention of greenwashing, and Hossain, Hossain and Urme (2025) find negative effects on green brand trust and loyalty, and more significant effects in fashion than food. Policarpo et al. (2023) demonstrate that social cynicism also spreads to a reduction of trust in green clothing brands, perceived greenwashing. The results support focusing on trust as the key element of the conceptual framework. However, cross sectional path models are better suited for elucidating relationships between predetermined variables than they are for capturing "how consumers move from uncertainty about one message to greater distrust.

Behavioural consequences have implications beyond purchase intention. Promalessy and Handriana (2024) correlate greenwashing to scepticism and negative word of mouth, and Wang and Jung (2025) find complaints responses. However, intention does not equal behaviour. According to Rausch & Kopplin (2021), Wiederhold & Martinez (2018), Diddi et al. (2019) and Blas Riesgo, Lavanga & Codina (2023), the sustainable-fashion attitude–behaviour gap is influenced by price, availability, style, habit, knowledge and perceived risk. Additionally, Do et al. (2025) conclude that perception of greenwashing may diminish the link between the purchase drivers and green fashion purchase intention. Consumers can be skeptical of an attribute and still buy due to price or style or believe a claim and not buy due to price. The pattern that is expected, however, is not a consistent decrease in purchasing, but rather diminished trust, claim-specific scepticism and hesitation, switching, loss of loyalty, complaint, negative word of mouth and continued purchases despite the lack of trust.

2.7 Integrated Theoretical Framework

2.7.1 Signalling Theory

Signalling Theory is the theory of communication when one party has information that cannot be directly observed by the other (Connelly et al., 2011). Consumers don't know as much about materials, sourcing, production and emissions and environmental performance as fast-fashion brands do. Product labels and certifications, traceability data, targets and sustainability reports are then, therefore, signals of hidden qualities. Specificity, verifiability, consistency through channels, and the potential for difficulty to imitate without substantive environmental action should signal greater credibility. Vague terms and nature imagery are less powerful signals since their reproduction is possible at relatively low cost, for environmentally poor performers (Schmuck, Matthes and Naderer, 2018; de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). The theory offers some insight into how consumers evaluate evidence, clarity, and consistency but does not focus on how consumers draw conclusions about the marketer's motive.

2.7.2 Persuasion Knowledge Model

The PKM suggests that consumers build knowledge about the persuader, objectives and tactics and that this knowledge is used to interpret and cope with persuasive attempts (Friestad and Wright, 1994). Consumers may question what a brand is emphasizing and why, especially in the case of environmental 'marketing' for reputation reasons; and whether the concern is being used as

a means to create an incentive for continued consumption. Therefore, the same assertion can be seen as informative to one consumer and manipulative to another based on their prior exposure to the greenwashing, experience with marketing, and knowledge of the environment (Munir and Mohan, 2022; Timmons, Whelan and Kelly, 2024). While consumers may reject a claim as a result of weak supporting evidence, there is scepticism based on the suspected image management, which is addressed by PKM.

2.7.3 Theoretical Integration

Theories go to different components of an evaluative process. Signalling Theory is about how consumers evaluate the quality and credibility of sustainability information; PKM is about how consumers evaluate the persuasive motive of the information and the persuasive tactic. There are two implicit questions in the consumer evaluation: 'Is this claim sufficiently supported?' and 'Why is the brand making this claim in this form?'. Perceived 'greenwashing' can be caused by weak signals and/or manipulative motive attributions (Akturan, 2018; Isac et al., 2025; Hossain, Hossain and Urme, 2025; Promalessy and Handriana, 2024).

2.8 Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

Figure 2.1 is not a statistical causal model but an interpretive framework that illustrates some of the causal mechanisms that are likely to occur. The information given to consumers is fast-fashion sustainability claims. Signal quality and persuasive motive are assessed by environmental knowledge and prior experience and brand familiarity. These assessments can create an impression of greenwashing, impacting on the credibility of the claims, green brand trust and scepticism. Outcomes from trust shape purchase hesitation, loyalty, switching and word of mouth, and price, style, convenience and habit can inhibit the transition from trust to action.

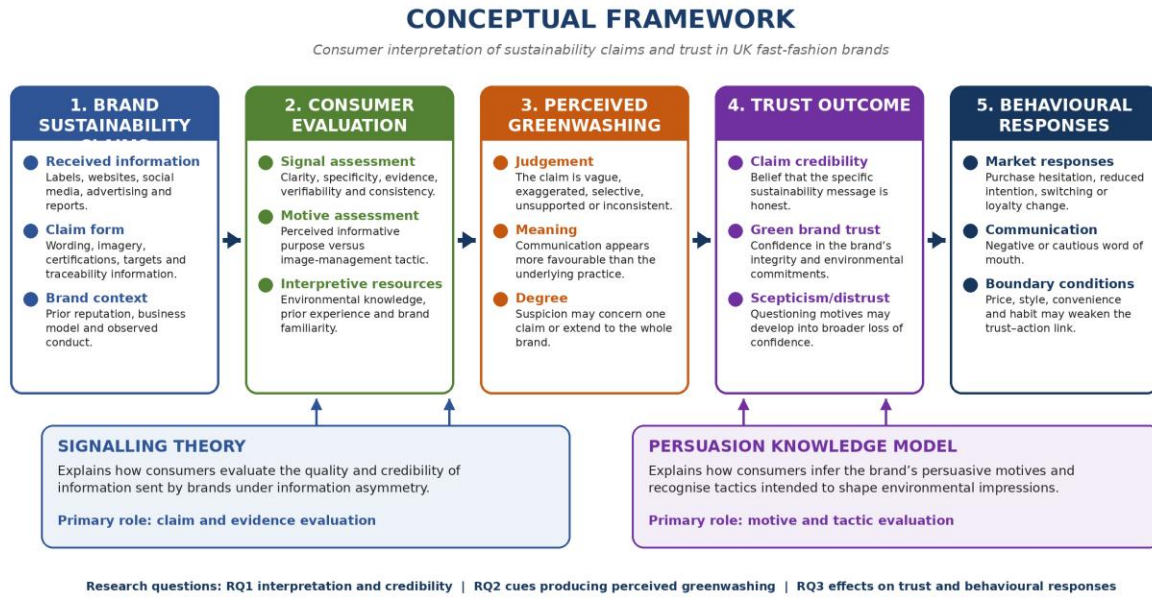


Figure 1: Integrated conceptual framework for consumer evaluation of sustainability claims

- How do UK fast-fashion consumers interpret sustainability claims made by fashion brands?
- What factors lead consumers to perceive fast-fashion sustainability marketing as greenwashing?
- How does perceived greenwashing influence consumer trust and purchase intention?

2.9 Research Gap and Expected Analytical Contribution

According to systematic reviews, the focus of greenwashing research has been mostly on the branding outcomes and attitudes and purchase intentions, and there is a need to pay more attention to the interpretation by stakeholders and the contextual differences (Santos, Coelho and Marques, 2024). Of particular interest to the current study is the four gaps. Firstly, UK evidence is limited, and especially of how consumers interpret individual sustainability claims in the context of fast-fashion. Second, much of the existing literature is based on surveys or experiments that assess the relationships between pre-specified variables, which are less informative on how consumers make judgements on credibility and greenwashing. Third, vague claims and imagery, as well as other types of sustainability communication, have shown mixed results in previous studies, indicating that the reaction to these depends on the type of claim, the brand context and consumer knowledge. Fourth, buying intention does not necessarily reflect actual purchasing behaviour, as consumers

might not necessarily stop purchasing when they are sceptical, but they may do so due to price, style, convenience, habit, or brand attachment.

In this study, the method used is the semi-structured interview and thematic analysis, not predictive, but explanatory or narration of the reasoning of consumers. Literature indicates that clear and unambiguous claims with evidence that is measurable, or can be verified, can have a positive effect on credibility; on the other hand, evidence that is ambiguous, selective, may appear as image management and is inconsistent with the rest of the claim may lead to a perception of greenwashing, affecting trust and influencing behaviour.

2.10 Chapter Summary

The chapter has revealed how sustainability marketing is credible or questionable in a dynamic of the quality of the claims, brand conduct, persuasive motive, and consumers' knowledge. Part of the variation between studies is due to country, type of claim, brand familiarity and choice of outcomes. Signalling Theory is complemented by PKM to explain how information about sustainability becomes a part of consumer evaluation, perception of greenwashing, trust and behaviour. The research questions that arise from this result offer a logical framework for qualitative methodology outlined in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The chapter highlights, explains and argues the research methods employed to explore the meanings attributed to sustainability marketing by UK fast-fashion consumers, their awareness of potential greenwashing and their reaction to it in terms of their trust, scepticism and purchasing patterns. It includes the topics of philosophy, design, sampling, interviewing, data collection, thematic analysis, ethics and limitations. These decisions are related to the research questions, and the study's purpose of providing contextual explanation instead of statistical generalisation.

3.2 Research Philosophy

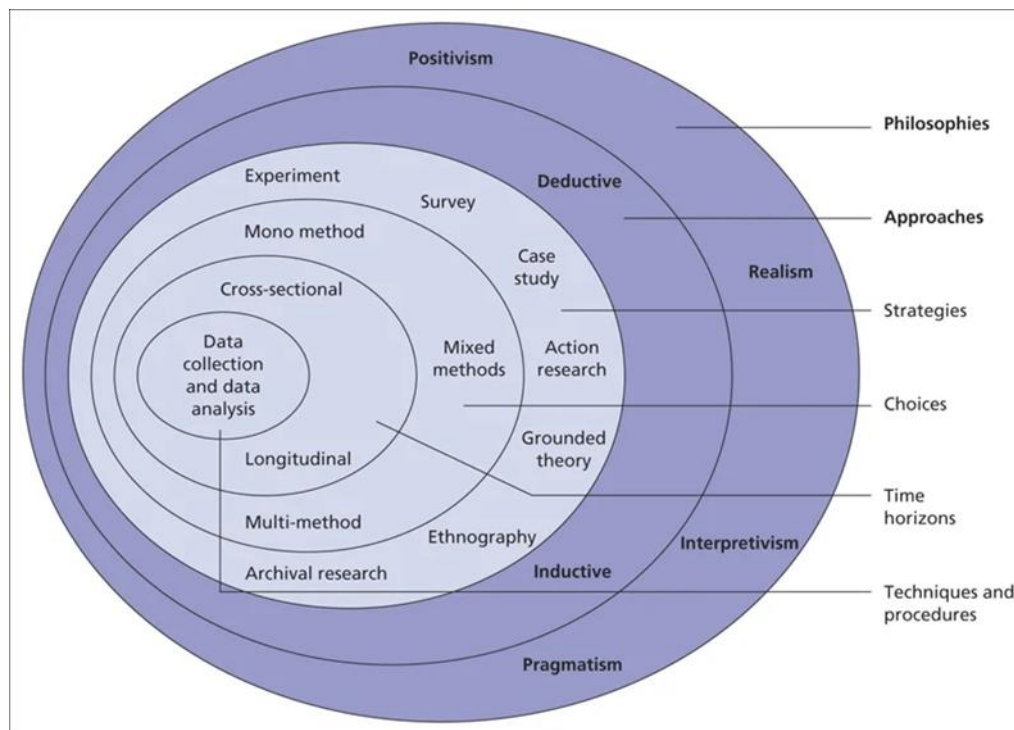


Figure 2: Research Onion (Saunders et al., 2019)

The study is conducted with the philosophy of interpretivist approach. In contrast to the view of knowledge as a set of objective facts, an interpretivist view sees knowledge as a result of people's social situation meanings and interpretations (Ryan, 2018). This position is suitable for the dissertation as it is not being set up by an environmental audit. Rather, the study looks into the ways consumers evaluate claims as believable, overstated, selective and/or manipulative based on their own knowledge, experiences and understanding of the brand.

Testing pre-determined relationships across many participants would be a positivist design, but would not yield as much detail as to why certain words, images, labels or inconsistencies raise suspicion. Interpretivism addresses all three questions by seeing credibility, persuasive motives and trust and behavioural responses as meanings which can differ across consumers. It also acknowledges the role of the researcher in challenging and interpretation, leading to reflexivity.

3.3 Research Approach and Design

The research design was an abductive qualitative interpretivist approach using a theory-informed approach. The research process was not only inductive, but also iterative, proceeding between the theoretical concepts that are used and the patterns that emerge in participants' explanations. The interview questions and the interpretation of the consumers' responses were guided by Signalling Theory and by the Persuasion Knowledge Model, as well as the conceptual framework that was developed in Chapter 2. These concepts were not applied as a rigid code scheme nor were they applied to test preconceived hypotheses however. The analysis was thus open to unanticipated meanings, experiences and behavioural contradictions that arose out of the interview data.

This study used a semi-structured individual interview technique, a qualitative design approach, as the researcher aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the consumer's perceptions of sustainability claims, awareness of greenwashing, as well as their explanation of the changes in trust and purchase attitude. The flexible interview format gave participants the opportunity to explain their thinking in depth, and to have clarification questions. This design facilitated an iterative relationship between the empirical accounts and the theoretical ideas that underpinned the study.

3.4 Participant Selection and Sample Size

The study employed purposive sampling to recruit a sample of U.K.-based adult fast-fashion consumers with first-hand experience in the context of this study. Purposive sampling was suitable because participants had to have a good understanding of fast fashion purchasing and sustainability marketing to be able to provide credible accounts of credibility, perceived greenwashing, trust and purchase attitudes (Campbell et al., 2020).

The participants were required to be 18 years or older, currently reside in the UK, buy fast fashion regularly (at least once a month), and have heard sustainability claims from brand websites, product labels or social media. At the time of the recruitment 28 participants were initially

interested and were screened based on these criteria. Of these, nine were removed due to the lack of one or more of the eligibility criteria. Nineteen subjects were therefore eligible but four did not move on to the interview or dropped out before data collection began. As a result, 15 participants completed the semi-structured interviews and all 15 interviews were analysed.

The sample of 15 was deemed adequate for this qualitative study, given the purpose and scope of the study. The research focused on a well-defined phenomenon in a relatively narrow population: UK adults who regularly bought fast fashion clothes and were familiar with sustainability claims. Focused qualitative interview studies with relatively homogeneous groups of participants often yield good coverage of themes in about 9-17 interviews (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022), fitting within the scope of the present sample. Sample size was not the only criterion used to evaluate sample adequacy; rather, the quality and depth of the data were also considered. The 15 participants were a mix of age, gender, occupation, education and shopping method, presenting different views on the consumers.

3.5 Semi-Structured Interviews and Interview Guide

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews via online medium. This method is based on a series of topics that are flexible enough to explore meaning, illustration and paradox. Structured: This would limit participants to researcher stated answers, and it would also be possible to have uneven coverage of the research questions in a completely unstructured interview. The semi-structured interview offers an acceptable level of comparability and richness.

The guide was created by linking the information needs to each research question, outlining general domains from literature, creating open and not-leading questions and testing the guide and refining the wording and order of the questions. This is linking what they learned and what they are trying to learn (Kallio et al., 2016).

The guide includes aspects of buying context, claims found, interpretation, cues for credibility or suspicion, brand motives, trust, scepticism and reactions (hesitation, switching, loyalty, complaint, word of mouth and continued purchase).

3.6 Data-Collection Procedure

There was a recruitment notice distributed via relevant online UK networks and social media groups. Eligibility screening was conducted and an information sheet provided for those interested

in participating in the study, which covered purpose, voluntariness, recording, confidentiality and withdrawal. Any electronic interviews will be preceded by written electronic consent.

Interviews were scheduled at a mutually convenient time, and took place on an institutionally approved videoconferencing platform. Interviewing online is suitable if participants are spread throughout the UK, and videoconferencing can be used for suitable and acceptable qualitative interaction provided care is taken in relation to the privacy of those being interviewed, connectivity and recording. (Archibald et al., 2019). The length of each interview were approximately 35-50 minutes. Audio were transcribed verbatim and double checked. Identifier's were stripped and participants coded (P01). Initial analysis was concurrent with collection, with the intention of using a later interview to further develop issues that arise, not to alter the questions.

3.7 Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis Process (6 Stages)

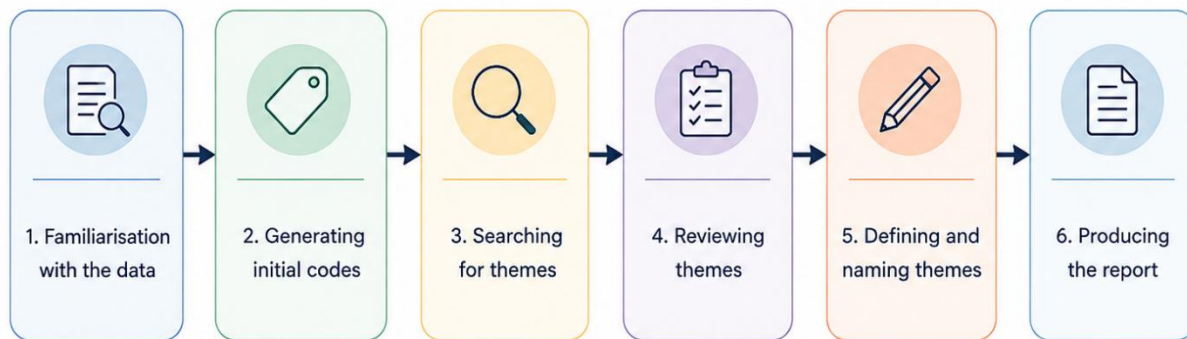


Figure 3: Thematic Analysis Process (Braun and Clarke, 2019)

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the 15 interview transcripts. This was suitable as the study aimed to gain insight into the meaning of the sustainability claims, the perception of possible greenwashing, and the responses to purchasing when greenwashing was detected. The interpretivist and theory-based abductive method used in this study was also suitable for reflexive thematic analysis because themes were not seen as categories that existed in the data but as a

process that unfolded through an iterative interplay between the interview data, the research questions and the relevant sensitising concepts (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

Analysis was done in the following manner as per the 6 recursive phases proposed by Braun and Clarke in their work: Familiarisation with the data, initial coding, development of candidate themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, production of the analytical account. The first reading of each transcript was repeated, and notes were taken regarding common themes and connections to answers to the research questions, and on contrasting responses and issues that arose. Transcripts were then systematically coded with the help of MS Word and MS Excel. The conceptual framework was open to participants' accounts and did not serve as a code book to inform interpretation.

Initial codes included claim meaning, specificity, supporting evidence, verification, vague language, green imagery, selective disclosure, previous brand experience, consistency across communication channels, consumer knowledge, social media influence, loss of trust and trust repair, which were all identified as purchase hesitation and trust repair. If an extract had multiple relevant meanings an extract was assigned more than one code to ensure the complexity of a response would not be summarised under one code.

The coded extracts were then contrasted between participants and clustered by conceptual similarity. For instance, codes related to measurable information, evidence, verification and claim specificity were clustered around claim credibility, and vague wording, unsupported claims, selective disclosure and inconsistent messages added to a general greenwashing suspicion. The codes related to consumers were divided into different groups: knowledge codes, codes of time pressure, codes of price, codes of convenience and codes of shopping context. Such grouping was repeated and checked against the original transcripts to ensure that these were patterns of comments in the data set rather than just a single comment.

In this iterative process, provisional categories were modified to seven categories of final themes. Theme boundaries were discussed, similarities and differences were compared and contrasted, contradictory cases were discussed, and themes were maintained if they were coherent and meaningful within the dataset and relevant to the research questions. The later-interviews consisted

primarily of other examples, qualifications and contrasts to existing patterns, and required only minor adjustments to the thematic framework. The final themes were therefore interpreted versions of the data and were not a literal translation of the interview questions or the number of certain answers. The process of analysis overall was guided by the principles of coherence, transparency and reflexivity as stated by Braun and Clarke (2021).

3.8 Ethics and Data Management

Prior to recruitment, ethical approval will be acquired by the relevant university process. Informed consent will be obtained and participation will be voluntary. Participants will be reminded that they have the right to refuse to answer any question, to end the interview or to ask to be withdrawn from the interview up to the anonymisation or analysis deadline, without penalty. There will be no deception or financial or academic pressure placed on potential participants.

Direct identifiers will be deleted, consent records be kept separately and quotes will be checked for indirect identification. Recordings, transcripts and analytic files will be stored on encrypted, password protected, university approved storage device with limited access and deletion per university policy. If brands are required analytically, comments presented will be made in the consumer voice, not as a substantiation of the performance of brands, since this is not a sustainability audit.

3.9 Methodological Limitations

Purposive self-selection may lead to targeting of consumers with high sustainability concerns; online recruitment does not capture all consumers, and answers may be influenced by recall and/or social desirability. Fifteen interviews are not enough for statistical generalisation and the themes are dependent on the interpretation of the researcher. These will be offset through broad recruitment, neutral questions, concrete examples, divergent case documentation, reflexive memoing, and transparent reporting. The goal is not to provide population estimates but rather contextual depth.

3.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has shown the need for a theory-informed abductive qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm. design with 15 selected UK fast-fashion consumers via online semi-structured interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis will help to understand how the evaluation of

claims is perceived as 'greenwashing' and how it influences trust and behaviour. Ethics and limitations are inherent in the process. The themes will be presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the results of the interview dataset are presented and discussed critically with regard to the study aim of understanding the perception of sustainability marketing claims among consumers of fast fashion products and its effect on trust, scepticism and purchase attitude regarding the brand. Analysis was conducted on the logic of reflexive thematic-analysis, as described in Chapter 3. The responses of the interviews were read repeatedly for familiarisation and then coded at the meaningful statement level. Seven themes were finalized following a review across participants of related codes combined and clustered in broader categories. The coding structure was in a hierarchy that was similar to the NVivo system of parent nodes and child nodes, but still researcher-led rather than software-led. The chapter is intentionally structured in a double analytical level. The thematic findings section remains close to the participants' accounts and relies on verbatim quotes to illustrate how interpretations were made from the data set.

4.2 Participant Profile

The study consisted of 15 participants (P1-P15) who varied in age, gender, occupation, education and shopping. More participants were 25–34 years old, followed by 35–44-year-old participants and fewer were 18–24 or 45–54 years old. The students, retail and hospitality workers, professionals, administrative staff, a nurse, teacher, engineer and care worker participated. Most of the bought fast fashion items were purchased once a month and some bought two or three times a month. Shopping was conducted online, in shop or both and brands mentioned were H&M, Primark, Zara, ASOS, New Look, Boohoo and Shein.

The characteristics seemed to influence the evaluation of sustainability communication of some of the participants, but a causal relationship could not be drawn. There was no consistent difference in perceptions across age. A level of scrutiny towards environmental claims, however, seemed to be influenced by education, occupational experience and sustainability awareness. Those who were more interested or aware of sustainability tended to seek evidence or information, measurable information and verification, while the others emphasized simple and easy to explain explanations. Shopping habits also affected exposure to claims, with online shoppers being more likely to be exposed to communication sent through websites, and in-store shoppers to information about the product and labels.

Table: Participant characteristics

Code	Age	Gender	Occupation	Education	Purchase frequency	Shopping method
P1	18-24	Female	University student	Undergraduate	About once a month	Both
P2	25-34	Male	Retail assistant	College diploma	Two or three times a month	Both
P3	35-44	Female	School teacher	Bachelor's degree	About once a month	Mostly in-store
P4	25-34	Female	Nurse	Bachelor's degree	About once a month	Mostly online
P5	35-44	Male	Office administrator	College diploma	About once a month	Mostly in-store
P6	25-34	Female	Graphic designer	Bachelor's degree	Two or three times a month	Both
P7	18-24	Male	Postgraduate student	Bachelor's degree	About once a month	Mostly online
P8	35-44	Male	Delivery coordinator	College diploma	About once a month	Mostly in-store
P9	25-34	Female	Accountant	Master's degree	About once a month	Mostly online
P10	45-54	Female	Care worker	College diploma	About once a month	Mostly in-store
P11	25-34	Male	Marketing assistant	Bachelor's degree	About once a month	Mostly online
P12	18-24	Female	Hospitality worker	College diploma	Two or three times a month	Mostly online
P13	45-54	Male	Administration manager	Bachelor's degree	About once a month	Mostly in-store
P14	25-34	Male	Engineer	Master's degree	About once a month	Both
P15	35-44	Female	Freelance administrator and parent	Bachelor's degree	About once a month	Both

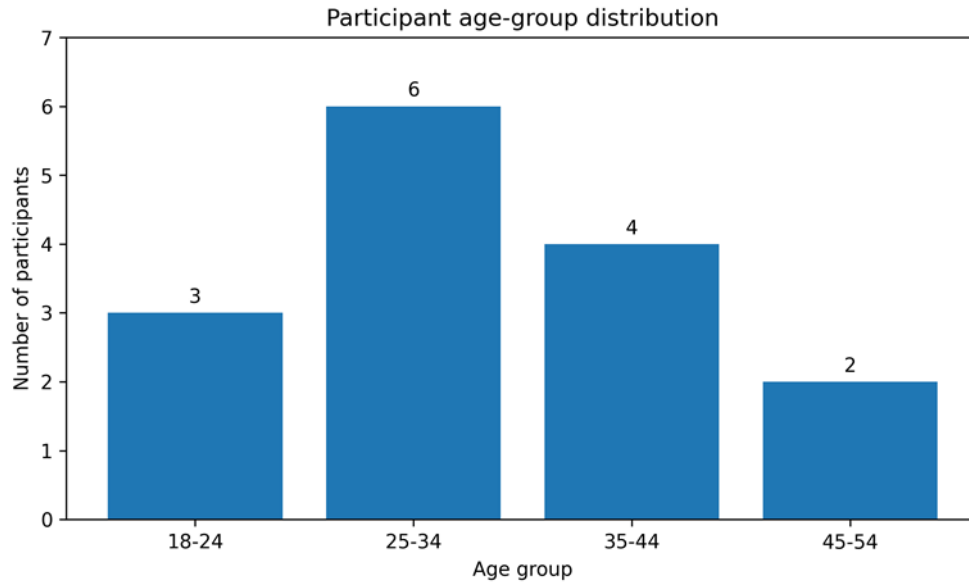


Figure 4.1. Participant age-group distribution.



Figure 4.2. Usual fast-fashion shopping method.

4.3 Coding and Theme Development

First coding of all 15 interview transcripts was finished. The transcripts were read several times and relevant parts were coded based on the meaning and the linkage with the research questions. The codes captured the initial codes as follows: claim meaning, codes for specificity, measurable information, supporting evidence, codes for verification, vague language, selective disclosure,

previous brand experience, consistency across communication channels, consumer knowledge, social-media influence, loss of trust, purchase hesitation and trust recovery. If an extract included two ideas or more, more than one code was given to avoid any complicated response being placed in a single category.

The process of developing the themes was not a linear one, but rather was iterative and did not follow the structure of the interview questions. These codes were correlated with one another among the participants and clustered into more general abstract patterns. For instance, those codes related to specific and measurable detail, clear and accessible information, verification and honest recognition of limitations were clustered around the claim credibility. Reflecting the other side of the coin, vague wording, green images, missing evidence, selective disclosure and promotional framing were clustered around the suspicion of greenwashing. Consumer influences such as knowledge and social media, time pressures, price, convenience, style and need were integrated to explain the real-world context in which sustainability claims are considered.

The provisional categories were then compared to the extracts from the original interviews. Special consideration was paid to whether each pattern was found in each participant and whether each extract in a proposed theme had a coherent underlying meaning. Differences between participants were retained during this process. Some participants emphasized the need for numerical data information that can be measured while others emphasized the need for clear explanations or independent verification. That previous brand experience was also more influential to some than others. At the same time, lack of trust in sustainability information was not necessarily an inhibitor for the purchase of the product, as price, convenience, and style and product needs still were significant.

Finally, seven themes were developed from the coding process. There were 16 occurrences of child codes in Theme 1, Sustainability as Reduced Harm, but an Ambiguous Promise, comprising reduced environmental harm (6) and need for a clear definition (10). The theme Evidence and Specificity Build Claim Credibility had 86 instances: specific or measurable detail (24), clear and accessible information (18), verification or independent support (35), and honest limits or boundaries (9).

Vague, Selective and Promotional Claims Trigger Greenwashing Suspicion appeared 64 times in Theme 3: Vague or Broad Wording (11); Green Imagery or Symbols (14); Missing or Weak Evidence (9); Selective Disclosure or Context (10); Promotional or Emotional Framing (20). Theme 4: Consumer Judgement is Filtered Through Brand History and Consistency contained 47 examples: Prior experience or reputation (9); Consistency across time and channels (32); Wider business-behaviour fit (6).

Consumer Knowledge, social media and Practical Shopping Context Shape Evaluation had 91 child-code occurrences: price (44), convenience (11), style and need (14), consumer knowledge/consumer literacy (22), and time constraint/accessibility (22). Theme 6: Suspected Greenwashing Erodes Trust Beyond the Individual Claim, had 36 instances, which included distrust of the claims (21), distrust of the brand or future claims (11), and general scepticism (4).

Lastly, Theme 7: Behavioural Responses are Conditional and Trust Recovery Requires Proof Over Time, included 61 cases: hesitation (10), comparison/switching (5), reduced purchasing (10), correction/apology (18), sustained evidence for recovery (18).

In the seven themes, 401 child-code occurrences were present in the coding hierarchy. The following frequencies were used for these to determine the distribution of coded material and were not considered to be an indication of thematic importance. The criteria for analytical importance were: coherence of the author's account; recurrence; relevance to the research questions; explanatory value.

Table: Coding summary and final thematic structure

Theme	Final theme	Illustrative child codes	Child-code occurrences	RQ alignment
T1	Sustainability as Reduced Harm, but an Ambiguous Promise	Reduced environmental harm; need for clear definition	16	RQ1
T2	Evidence and Specificity Build Claim Credibility	Specific/measurable detail; clear/accessible information; verification; honest limits	86	RQ1, RQ2
T3	Vague, Selective and Promotional Claims Trigger Greenwashing Suspicion	Vague wording; green imagery; missing evidence; selective disclosure; promotional framing	64	RQ2
T4	Consumer Judgement is Filtered Through Brand History and Consistency	Prior experience; reputation; consistency across time/channels; wider business-behaviour fit	47	RQ2

T5	Consumer Knowledge, Social Media and Practical Shopping Context Shape Evaluation	Price/convenience/style/need; consumer knowledge; social media; time/accessibility	91	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
T6	Suspected Greenwashing Erodes Trust Beyond the Individual Claim	Claim-level distrust; spillover to brand/future claims; generalised scepticism	36	RQ3
T7	Behavioural Responses are Conditional and Trust Recovery Requires Proof Over Time	Hesitation/comparison/switching; reduced purchasing; continued buying; correction/apology; sustained evidence	61	RQ3

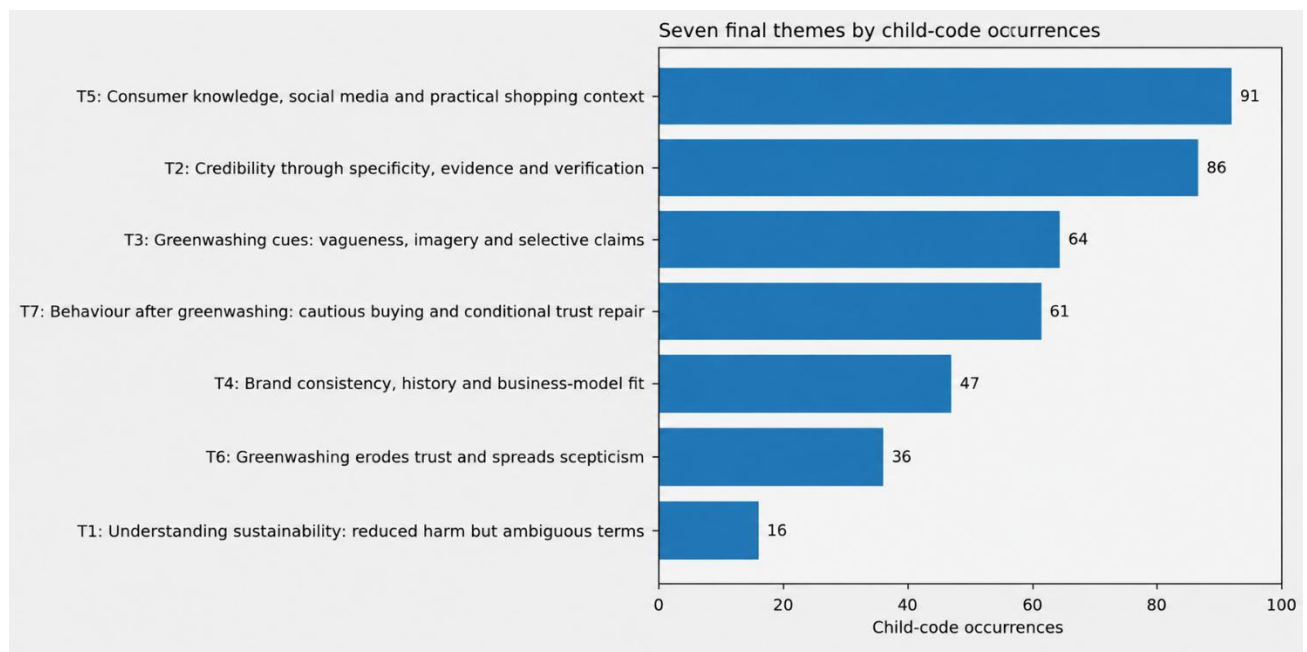


Figure 4.3. Seven final themes by response-level coded references.

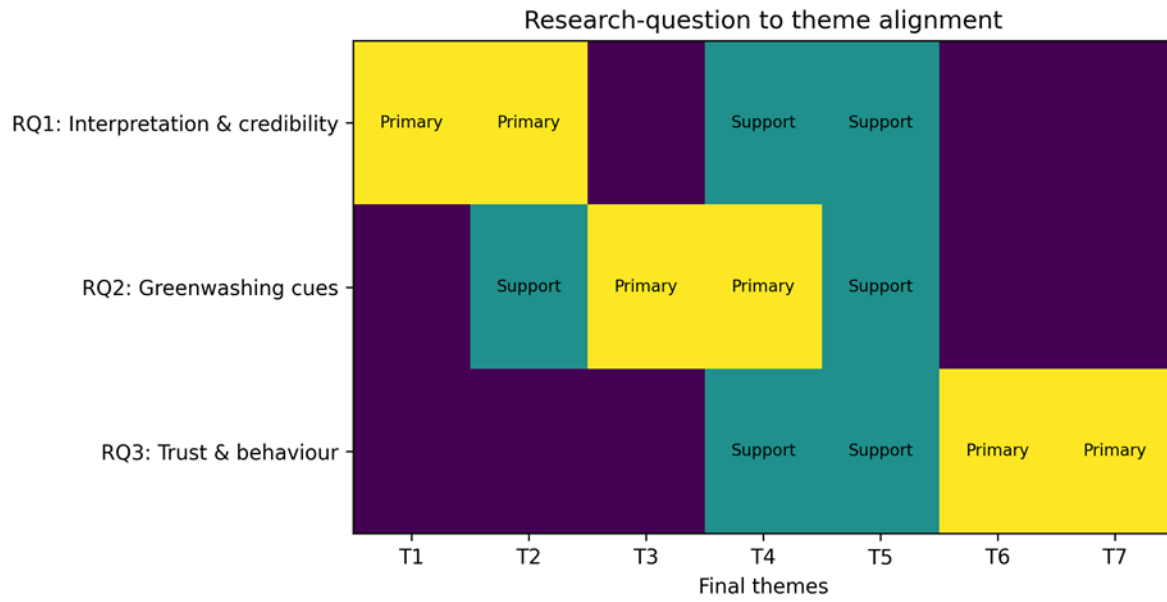


Figure 4.4. Research-question to theme alignment.

4.4 Thematic Findings

The main patterns that emerged from the coding are summarized in the next seven themes. Each subsection includes the participants' account, interpretation and comparison with the literature discussed in Chapter 2.

The thematic findings reveal that consumers do not simply assess sustainability claims based on environmental language; they assess the clarity, specificity, verifiability and consistency of the claims in relation to overall brand-related actions. This is of theoretical importance as it helps to explain the Signalling Theory which suggests that if sustainability messages can be perceived as credible communication, consumers will respond; and the Persuasion Knowledge Model which suggests that consumers question why sustainability messages are being sent. The results also indicate that trust can be lost when consumers feel they are being greenwashed, but this does not necessarily translate into a decision to stop buying – and sometimes price, style, convenience and brand loyalty can still have an impact on consumer behaviour. On a practical level, this means that fast-fashion companies need to take more than just pretty green logos and words to ensure credibility. There's a greater likelihood of building credibility when there's clear evidence, easy-to-understand explanations and consistency between marketing claims and business practices.

4.4.1 Sustainability as Reduced Harm, but an Ambiguous Promise

The concept of 'sustainable', 'eco-friendly' and 'responsible' was regarded as an indicator that a brand was trying to minimize the negative impacts on the environment. Common linkages were re-used or remanufactured materials, reduced waste, enhanced sourcing, and reduced harmful production practices. But often the terminology was not enough to be treated as an enough. The theme for this was thus a general positive environmental message and the doubts over the meaning of the words.

“To me, those words suggest that the brand is trying to reduce environmental harm, perhaps by using better materials or less waste. I still need more detail because the words alone can mean almost anything.” (P1)

“For me, sustainable or responsible sounds like the company is trying to make clothes in a better way. I do not know all the technical details, so I depend on clear explanations rather than general green words.” (P5)

“I treat those words as claims that need a clear definition. Sustainable can mean many things, so I look for numbers, materials, certifications or a stated process. Without that detail, the message is too open.” (P14)

The answers indicate that for most participants, sustainable, eco-friendly and responsible are understood as less harmful to the environment, better materials, less waste or better production processes, respectively. But having an overall grasp of the meaning of these expressions did not necessarily mean they were accepted as claims. Participants required additional information before determining if the message was believable. Some preferred simple explanations, while others looked for figures, materials, certification or a clearly stated process. This indicates that general sustainability vocabulary was more of a foundation for assessment than as adequate proof. Notably, there was not an automatic rejection of the ambiguous. Rather, the participants tended to see sustainability language in general as unfinished and wanted more information to make a more robust judgment.

4.4.2 Evidence and Specificity Build Claim Credibility

The theme relates to the positive conditions that fostered participants' acceptance of sustainability claims. Specificity was consistently admired: percentages were desired, material information desired, measurable targets, named standards, accessible source and clear demarcation around what a claim did and did not cover. A shorter, but still tangible, promise was more often than not preferred to the sweeping one that cannot be substantiated.

“A claim feels credible when a brand explains the change, gives figures and keeps the same information across its website and labels. I also trust it more when an independent certification is clearly named and explained.” (P3)

“The most credible claims are specific and verifiable. I trust a message more when it includes measurable information, explains the method and points to independent standards. That gives me a basis for judging the statement.” (P9)

“I trust sustainability information more when it is specific but not exaggerated. If a brand explains the material, gives a percentage and admits the claim only covers one part of the product, that feels realistic.” (P15)

The results of the participant responses show that credibility was affected by the specificity and understandability of the information about sustainability, and the possibility of checking it. Measurable figures, material information, named standards, certification and clear explanations were all mentioned by participants as helpful evidence. But more information was not necessarily considered as better information. Even with the technical detail, if the consumers were not able to comprehend what the detail was showing or how it connected with the claim, the technical detail could still fail to be effective. A further pattern was the emphasis on well-defined boundaries. When a brand made a claim about a specific component of a product or process, participants seemed more willing to believe than when it made a claim about the entire product or process. The use of realistic language and disclosure of uncertainties was a further means of establishing credibility, as was the evidence. Participants generally preferred claims that provided them with a basis for judgement vs general environmental claims for which they had to make assumptions.

4.4.3 Vague, Selective and Promotional Claims Trigger Greenwashing Suspicion

The participants came up with a consistent group of warning signs that made sustainability marketing seem like it was a bit of a sham or could be deceptive. These encompassed the use of language that lacked precision, nature imagery, green colours and symbols, an absence of sources, an overreliance on slogans, statistics that were selective, inaccessible details and environmental claims appearing to be more significant than the evidence supporting them. The greater the suspicion arose that the communication was aimed at making an impression than was at evaluation.

“The first thing I notice with vague wording, and I also see brands use many green colours or nature images, but there's no evidence. That way, I feel it's more of a sales pitch than the information.” (P1)

“I don't trust messages with "fluffy" language, nature photos or well-selected statistics that ignore the broader business context.” (P11)

“Certain numbers look precise, but can be misleading when presented without context, for example, a percentage increase without referring to the starting point.” (P14)

The answers indicate that the participants were not only thinking of outright lies as an example of greenwashing. Suspicion also grew when information was lacking in clarity, selective or promotional in nature. Participants cited ambiguous language, nature imagery, green colors, lack

of evidence and statistics, without an appropriate context. The use of percentages with no mention of a starting point or basis of comparison was a particularly important issue. This means that in some cases, mere numbers were not sufficient to substantiate credibility. Participants seemed to be wondering if the information gave them an understanding of the environmental improvement or if it gave them a positive impression. The results thus indicate that consumers responded to the way the information was presented, as well as to the information itself. Participants were more apt to challenge the intent of the communication and to think it might be misleading when the evidence was hard to find, or was provided in isolation or in a limited context.

4.4.4 Consumer Judgement is Filtered Through Brand History and Consistency

This theme indicates that sustainability claims were not evaluated separately. Participants compared new messages to what they already knew about a brand, such as past shopping experiences, past advertising campaigns, public criticism, perceived reputation, and consistency between communication and their overall behaviour. Knowing could contribute to trust, but it may also highlight the contradictions.

“When I see a new claim, I compare it to what I believe about the company; when I see a brand that has had a proven history, it's more reliable for me to believe, but if it is contradicting or has been criticized in the past, I scrutinize the new messages.” (P3)

“Reliable communication over time makes me more inclined to believe what it says, while inconsistent or vague campaigns make me more critical.” (P6)

“Trust comes through repeated experiences with a brand; if the brand is sending me the same message again and again, I'm more willing to accept news that's coming from them. If it's changing my message all the time, I'm not sure what I can trust.” (P13)

The answers suggest that sustainability claims were not treated as a separate dimension to the extent that it was evaluated independent of what participants had experienced with the brand up to that point. Participants contrasted new claims to communication, to past criticism, to reputation, and to the consistency of the messages over time. A positive history would help to persuade consumers to take a new claim more seriously; a negative history or a controversy over it would lead to more critical examination. The participants did not seem to see reputation as evidence of the truth of a sustainability claim, however. Rather, it was the history of the brand that determined

the degree of trust or distrust that entered the evaluation process. The results indicate that credibility was thus added and contextual. Even though consumers were exposed to each message in isolation, they did not make impressions based on a single exposure, but multiple ones. The consistency seemed to be crucial, as any incongruous or contradictory messages might have reduced confidence even if the one in question seemed plausible. The brand history thus served as a filter that allowed the understanding and evaluation of new sustainability communication.

4.4.5 Consumer Knowledge, Social-Media and Practical Shopping Context Shape Evaluation

Participants said that the sustainability claim had an impact on how they assessed the claim, but this was also influenced by their background knowledge of sustainability, social media and their everyday shopping situation. Social media played two roles. It was on the other hand an easy tool for the dissemination of sustainability information, enabling consumers to be exposed to brand campaigns, environmental claims and descriptions of products. At the same time, it also offered a platform to scrutinise, contrast and challenge these statements in posts, comments, influencer posts and discussions around the potential for 'greenwashing'.

The more sustainable aware the participants are, the more they tended to reflect on claims and search for evidence for them; other participants tended to use the simple and readily available information. But the social media scrutiny did not always mean buying behaviour. Price, convenience, style and time continued to play a role and some consumers might be skeptical of a sustainability claim but still buy from the brand. The finding is significant because it implies an informational scrutiny is a driver of consumer evaluation in addition to the general constraints on purchase.

“When people are shopping, they are only able to do a quick check to see if the claim is made by the brand, so there should be key evidence right there, rather than customers having to do a lot of research.” (P4)

“Social media has a significant impact because both advertising and criticism can be viewed simultaneously. A claim can appear very convincing, but then get rebutted by comments or videos, and people can get confused about what it is saying.” (P7)

“Consumer knowledge should be taken into account, as not everyone will interpret the same evidence in the same way; the statement may reassure one person but confuse another, so transparency should encompass accessibility and understandable explanations.” (P9)

The answers indicate that sustainability information was understood differently in relation to consumer knowledge, exposure to social media and reality of shopping. Higher sustainability awareness seemed to be associated with a more critical examination of claims and the search for supporting evidence, whereas the others seemed more likely to accept information that was simple and readily available. Social media was also a double-edged sword. It was a platform that allowed consumers to be exposed to brand sustainability messages but also have the opportunity to challenge these messages in comments, videos and other discussion. This may lead to questions being raised but confusion will also be added, if conflicting views were given by different sources. Another was time, because they said that people make decisions quickly, and may not dig into the details of the evidence when shopping normally. These are answers that point in the direction of practical consideration of transparency. Technical information can be available, but may not be of value to the consumer if it is not easily understood or accessible. When considering how much to pay attention to sustainability claims, price, convenience and style also were relevant.

4.4.6 Suspected Greenwashing Erodes Trust Beyond the Individual Claim

The sixth theme is about the implications for trust when there is suspected greenwashing. Frequently, participants indicated that a lack of confidence in one message would impact their confidence in the next, and sometimes their confidence in the overall brand. Greenwashing, then, seemed to have negatively affected not only the credibility of one ad, but the messaging that went beyond it.

“When my trust in claims is undermined by a lack of understanding or evidence, I am left wondering if other claims are also a little more than they might be. (P1)

“Trust is based on evidence; it's based on consistency; it's based on honesty about limitations. If I see a suspicion of greenwashing, it hurts me more than one claim, it creates doubt about the motives of the brand and I find it hard to believe what they are saying about sustainability.” (P6)

“Consistent information over time builds trust, but it can be undermined by greenwashing in a few moments, and even good claims may require a significant amount of more evidence to convince me.” (P13)

The answers reveal that there may be more than one initial message that causes concern that could become the subject of suspected greenwashing. Uncertainty in one claim was reported to influence trust in subsequent messages regarding sustainability from the same brand. This may indicate that the distrust may filter up from the claim level to the overall brand relationship. Participants also highlighted the importance of trust and the need for evidence-based trust; and there was a consistency and honesty about the limitations that led to confidence building in repeated communication, not just a single message. As suspicions grew, future claims would be evaluated with a greater scepticism and would need more evidence to be accepted. One thing that was apparent was that trust would appear to be difficult to repair once broken. When the next messages seemed more robust, participants explained how one dubious message could affect the interpretation of future messages.

4.4.7 Behavioural Responses are Conditional and Trust Recovery Requires Proof Over Time

The final theme was a reflection of what participants said they would do once they lose their trust and what brands have to do to regain it. Some of the most frequent responses were that they were hesitant to purchase, compared alternatives, decreased their purchases, changed brands, looked for information more carefully, and were less willing to pay more due to sustainability label. However, rejection did not always equate to outright rejection. Consumers may continue to buy from an untrusted brand if it meets their price, fit, convenience, style, and need and fits into their family budget.

“If they sold something at a reasonable price, I would continue to purchase it, but if they sell it because it's sustainable, then I wouldn't pay more for it, I would be more inclined to go to a different retailer.” (P10)

“Very likely, I would buy less from that brand and consider alternatives, if I did buy, it would be for environmental reasons; style or price.” (P12)

“There should be a detailed correction, the methodology explained and independent support for future claims; if communication that follows later is accurate and consistent, that’s how trust will be re-gained.” (P14)

Responses showed that lower trust did not result in a uniform behavioral response. Participants reported hesitation to buy, thinking of alternatives, reducing purchase, switching brands and decreased willingness to pay more for sustainability claims. Some of the respondents also said they would still buy the product if it was still affordable, easy to get or still looked attractive. This indicates that trust in sustainability communication did not always lead to actual purchasing behaviour. Consumers might be able to keep using the brand, but may have become less trusting of the brand's environmental claims. The answers to the question of what the recovery of trust means were more complex. They were not seeking only an apology or a new campaign, but detailed corrective measures, explanations and independent assistance and continued communication in the future. The rebuilding of confidence was considered a long-term process that needs to be evidenced over time.

4.5 Critical Discussion

The seven themes suggest that the process of UK fast-fashion consumers' acceptance or rejection of sustainability marketing is not linear. Rather, they spoke of a process of layers that involved: understanding the meaning of the claim, evaluating the quality and availability of the supporting evidence, comparing the message with their existing brand knowledge, determining the intent behind the message, and finally making a decision regarding the level of trust they would place in the message. This evaluation was a factor in making purchases, but so also were such factors as price, style, convenience, and habit. The results thus broadly validate the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter 2, but reveal some limitations in the currently available explanations. The most important of these results is that there is not a simple linear relationship between the concepts of credibility, perceived greenwashing, trust and behaviour.

Interpretation and Credibility of Sustainability Claims

Research Question 1 focused on the interpretation of sustainability claims and assessing their credibility by the consumers of fast fashion in the UK. Results in Theme 1, 2 and 5 indicated that participants had a general awareness of sustainability (including less environmental impact, more responsible production, and better use of resources). Participants did not necessarily believe the claim when they recognized its meaning in relation to sustainability, however. They searched for specificity, easily understood evidence, measurable information, known standards and chances to substantiate claims by the brand.

It partly confirms Ritch (2022) that consumers can be confused and skeptical about sustainability terminology. The present findings, however, bring an interesting modification. Not all the time was the lack of clarity in terminology directly followed by rejection. Others seemed to have entered into a state of conditional acceptance, willing to hear the message but wanting more information before they fully accept it. This is not the same as an interpretation that leads to a negative reaction if it is not clear. This may be due to consumers' familiarity with sustainability terms in a variety of brands or because the terms exist in the context of general terminology.

The results also make a simple application of Signalling Theory complicated. Information asymmetry was evident since brands have much better access to information about sourcing, materials, emission and production practices than consumers do (Connelly et al., 2011). Signals that seemed hard to fake (such as special figures, certifications, standards and independent verification) were therefore appreciated by participants. However, there was not only a need for numbers to be precise. For instance, the potential for concerns over percentages where the baseline is not well understood demonstrated that seemingly strong signals can also be weak if the consumer is unable to understand them. The problem is not only that there is evidence, but that consumers can understand what it shows.

This results in a more matured version of the signal quality interpretation. Current ways of explaining signals focus on the visible cues for the unobservable qualities. According to the present study, from the consumer's point of view, there should be a minimum of three conditions that must be met: a sustainability signal needs to be specific, credible and understandable. Just because the report is very technical and detailed, it doesn't necessarily make it a good consumer-facing signal,

if the average consumer doesn't understand it. On the other hand, a simple claim could be comprehensible, but very superficial in content and therefore not credible.

An alternate explanation should also be acknowledged. Limited knowledge may not be expressed by the preference of participants for information that is clear and easy to understand. It could rather be a consequence of the real-life circumstances in which fast fashion is purchased. Consumers may choose rapidly, and they may lack the time or motivation to look into the complex environmental information. Accessibility, then, should not be viewed as just a matter of consumer capability; it can also be a result of time pressure as well as low-involvement in some types of clothing purchases.

The process of the development of perceptions of greenwashing

The second research question explored why consumers are likely to consider sustainable marketing as 'greenwashing'. Themes 3, 4 and 5 revealed that claim related, brand related and consumer related cues were found to produce suspicion. Claims were often questioned because they were worded ambiguously, contained absolute statements, lacked supporting green imagery, included selective disclosure, and did not contain enough context for comparisons. On the brand side, participants also mentioned previous controversies, discrepancies between different communication channels, and felt that small sustainability efforts were competing with a larger volume of fast fashion business models.

These results align with those found by Schmuck, Matthes and Naderer (2018) and Munir and Mohan (2022) in their study about the perception of greenwashing, which indicate vagueness, imagery, transparency and inconsistency as significant factors. But the present study does not claim that any one cue will invariably result in a greenwashing perception. This is a significant distinction to those interpretations that focus on specific claim features. Most participants rated cues together. The meaning of image was not restricted to being misleading, as in nature imagery. It was even more suspicious when it was accompanied by the use of vague language and lack of evidence.

The fact that it is viewed as a judgment over time, rather than merely in response to one marketing approach, indicates that perceived greenwashing is more likely to be a cumulative judgment. As each inconsistency is added to the list, consumers seem to grow suspicious. This could be an

answer to the seemingly contradictory findings of previous experimental studies on the effects of vague claims, imagery and varying types of misleading communication. Experimental designs typically isolate one parameter, while customers in actual purchasing scenarios are simultaneously affected by brand reputation, prior communication, criticism from social media, product information and their own information.

The findings also further the application of the Persuasion Knowledge Model. Friestad and Wright (1994) suggest that consumers can make inferences regarding the marketers' intentions based on their knowledge of persuasion strategies. In this study, participants often judged both the content of the brand's message and the message's intent. Judged greenwashing motives were central and were manifested in expressions of image management, promotion and emotional communication or distraction. Importantly, there was a correlation between the extent to which the participants were able to accept a limited claim and their suspicion of it.

So it's important to differentiate between what is actually true and what is seen as a purpose. If consumers feel there is information, they need that has not been provided, even when the message is factually correct, it can impact trust. This does not imply that greenwashing perceptions are only assessments of truthfulness or falseness of information. They are also moral and relational valuations of the brand's righteousness in communicating.

Another possible source of suspicion could be attitudes towards the fast fashion business model or towards the specific sustainability claim being assessed. Customers who feel the effects of high-volume production to be the problem may more critically assess the sustainability communication of fast fashion brands. In these instances, the brand starts out with a disadvantage of credibility. This does not necessarily indicate that it is only because of the wording or evidence provided in a specific campaign that an evaluation was negative.

Social media adds to this. It provided participants with access to sustainability information but also exposed them to criticism, controversies and alternative interpretations of brand claims. Social media could, however, bolster consumers' scrutiny and also magnify the negative information. The overall communication context can thus influence a consumer's assessment, not just the strength of the brand's evidence.

Trust, Behaviour and the Limits of Purchase Intention

In the context of perceived greenwashing and consequent behavioural responses, Research Question 3 focused on the impact on trust. In Theme 6 and 7 it was established that in general bad trust was reduced by suspected greenwashing. Its impact was frequently far reaching, though. They reported a more critical attitude towards future sustainability communication, a higher sensitivity for criticism and more doubts about the intentions behind later communication. This aligns with the previous studies showing negative impacts of greenwashing and a decrease in trust (Akturan, 2018; Neumann, Martinez and Martinez, 2021; Policarpo et al., 2023; Isac et al., 2025).

The present study adds to this by elucidating the mechanism by which this erosion can take place. Participants did not seem to lose interest with one negative appraisal; instead, they seemed to alter their perceptions of the information given. After the suspicion period, additional sustainability messages would be subject to a higher degree of scrutiny. Loss of trust seems to be able to cause a “ripple effect” that can affect the veracity of future greenwashing claims, too.

One important domain in which the results challenge current beliefs, however, is that of purchase behaviour. Loss of trust did not necessarily lead to brand avoidance. A few from the cohort suggested that they would still be buying, due to the brand's affordability, convenience or style. However, the attitude–behaviour gap in sustainable fashion, as mentioned by Wiederhold and Martinez (2018), Diddi et al. (2019) and Rausch and Kopplin (2021) is reflected in the present findings, albeit in a more specific way when integrated into the greenwashing context.

But increased buying does not necessarily mean that greenwashing does not have much of a commercial impact. Consumers can still purchase products, but have become more disengaged, less willing to follow sustainability messages, less willing to pay premiums, and more willing to look at alternatives. Therefore, the damage may be a relational one rather than a straight deal. This is significant because research which has been mostly concentrated on purchase intention might underestimate the broader implications of the perception of greenwashing.

There are other possible explanations. Purchasing may occur even if financial limitations are at the root of the issue, and not because of their tolerance for the brand's sustainability practices. However, there are potential alternatives – they may be limited and options are not necessarily affordable – but if there are for fast-fashion consumers at least where price and convenience are a

key consideration. Ethical considerations can also be superseded by habit or availability at the moment of sale and style preference. Hence, it is not possible to extrapolate consumer behaviour from the mere fact that it occurred after greenwashing.

Trust Recovery and Reputation

The time of trust recovery added an additional temporal dimension. Overall, "apology" and a "new campaign" were not considered adequate to restore confidence. They were looking for updated information to correct misinformation, explanations for what went wrong, better evidence, independence of information where possible and consistency over time. The need for observable behavioural change and not just communication led to a consideration of the need for trust repair.

This discovery is significant because it indicates that there's an imbalance in the loss and recovery of trust. Trust can take a long time to be restored over time, and suspicion can arise rapidly with a sense of inconsistency. This challenge can be considered especially relevant in the fast-fashion environment, as individual sustainability assertions are assessed based on the overall business model. If consumers remain to see inconsistencies between the message and the organisation's practice, a new advertising campaign may be of little effect.

New Knowledge Gaining from the Study

Overall, the findings develop the Chapter 2 framework in four ways. There are two types of consumer evaluation, an evidence judgement and a motive judgement. Consumers evaluate the credibility of the information they're given and also whether the brand is presenting reasons that seem legit. Second, greenwashing perception is not monolithic and situational, but accumulative. Claim characteristics, brand history, information on social media and consumer knowledge interacts in the creation of suspicion. Third, transparency should be easy to get as well as available. The credibility value of information may be low if it is hard to find, understand or compare. Fourth, the behavioural consequences are contingent.

The study thus goes beyond the confirmation that greenwashing decreases trust. It demonstrates how consumers go from uncertainty to suspicion, how suspicion affects the meaning of subsequent communication, and the fact that not all damaged trust is equal to avoidance of purchase. In fast fashion, sustainability considerations are in conflict with price, style, convenience and habit. The qualitative results then offer a more process-oriented understanding of consumer responses to

greenwashing than would be achieved by measuring the effect of greenwashing, trust and purchase intention separately.

4.6 Chapter Summary

The chapter introduced seven themes that revealed how participants understood sustainability claims, identified potential greenwashing and gave descriptions of its consequences on trust and behavior. The word sustainability was, in general, interpreted as meaning a decrease of environmental damage, and broad statements were interpreted as incomplete and lacking if they were not backed up by specific and understandable evidence. Credibility was enhanced when claims were measurable, verifiable, consistent, transparent, and clear, and when claims were vague, information was selective, images were promotional, and there were inconsistencies in context, suspicion was raised.

The results also indicated that the presence of the suspected greenwashing in the claims may lead to more general scepticism about the brand's motives and the subsequent sustainability claims. Behavioural consequences were more conditional: participants reported that they were hesitant, made comparisons, lowered their buying and switching, but that price, convenience, style, fit and need could outweigh the distrust. To recover from the trust, it needed to be rectified with proof and continued effort through time. The findings as a whole provide answers to the three research questions and support an integrated analysis within the framework of Signalling Theory and the Persuasion Knowledge Model.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The chapter culminates the dissertation by summarising the main findings with regard to the three research questions, outlining the theoretical contribution and discussing the implications for fast fashion managers and e-commerce communication. The seven themes presented in Chapter 4 are not replicated here but brought together to demonstrate how the study contributes to understanding the perceptions of sustainability claims, perceived greenwashing, trust levels and subsequent purchasing responses. The chapter also offers practical recommendations for fast-fashion e-commerce, recognizes the methodological and contextual constraints of this research, and outlines some directions for further research.

5.2 Synthesis of Findings by Research Question

Research Question 1 asked how UK fast-fashion consumers interpret sustainability claims and determine whether they are credible. The results reveal that most of the subjects interpreted “sustainable”, “eco-friendly” and “responsible” as meaning that they will be causing less damage to the environment, using better materials, less waste or better production methods. But these terms were not considered to be self-evident truths. Until the brand gave them the necessary detail they were, naturally, only provisional in their meanings. This aligns with Ritch's (2022) results that the use of the terms related to sustainability in fashion can create doubt and confusion in the market, which is also aligned with the results of de Freitas Netto et al. (2020) regarding the potential risk of greenwashing perceptions in fashion sustainability terms that are vague.

When claims were specific, measurable, limited and backed up with easily available evidence, credibility was enhanced. Participants spoke and spoke again in favour of percentages, information on the material, named standards, certification, comparisons and independent verification. More importantly, information was not necessarily good information. The participants chose information that is quick to understand and to realistically check when shopping. The finding supports the results of the studies of Szabo and Webster (2021) who prove that green information affects environmental and product perceptions, and of de Jong, Harkink and Barth (2018), who prove that positive impressions on the environment can be weakened if the information presented is not credible. The study thus indicates that sustainability communication, to be successful, must be credible, both in terms of its evidential value and its usability.

Research Question 2 asked what claim-related, brand-related and consumer-related cues lead UK fast-fashion consumers to perceive sustainability marketing as greenwashing. At the claim level, suspicion was linked to general language, green imagery, slogans without supporting evidence, selective statistics, sources missing, unclear comparisons, and environmental claims that seemed more significant than the evidence. This aligns with the findings of Schmuck, Matthes and Naderer (2018), which demonstrate that statements of nature imagery and verbal claims can have an impact on perceptions of greenwashing, and with de Freitas Netto et al. (2020) which identify the forms of vagueness, selective disclosure and unsupported assertions.

At the brand level, participants took into account the past communication, reputation, controversies and consistency between sustainability communication and broader business practices. A small “sustainable” collection might be taken with a pinch of salt when it seemed to be in contradiction with a high volume, fast fashion model. This reinforces the call of Munir and Mohan (2022) for transparency and consistency in fashion-sector greenwashing judgements. Consumer interpretation was influenced by environmental knowledge, marketing awareness, past experience, social media criticism and time to explore claims. Timmons, Whelan and Kelly (2024) also illustrate that education can positively affect consumer awareness of greenwashing and Whelan and Kelly (2024) highlight that consumer orientations more generally can impact greenwashing perceptions and trust in products or services.

Research Question 3 explored the relationship between perceived greenwashing and trust and the resulting behavioural responses. The results indicate that suspected greenwashing can have negative impacts on more than one claim. Later messages about sustainability will require a higher threshold of evidence when consumers start to suspect, and eventually question, the brand's motive or honesty. This aligns with the findings that trust is an important result of greenwashing (Akturan, 2018; Neumann, Martinez and Martinez, 2021; Isac et al., 2025). The qualitative results provide explanatory depth and indicate that consumer trust breakdown can be explained partly by a reinterpretation of the persuasive intention of the brand, rather than by a conclusion that one message is false.

But a decrease in trust did not equate with instant brand rejection. Hesitation, comparing with alternatives, less purchasing, less willing to pay more for sustainability claims, and more checking of info were described by participants. But they also admitted that things that are cheap, easy to

get at, fashionable, comfortable and/or required will continue to be bought. This is in line with the sustainable-fashion attitude-behaviour gap that has long been known, where ethical concern stands in competition with the practical consumption factors (Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018; Diddi et al., 2019; Rausch and Kopplin, 2021). Based on this, the study concludes that greenwashing can undermine relational trust and the persuasive power of sustainability marketing even if the actual purchase does not end.

Table: Summary of answers to the research questions

Research question	Main supporting themes	Synthesised answer
RQ1: How do UK fast-fashion consumers interpret sustainability claims and determine whether they are credible?	T1, T2, T5	Consumers understand sustainability as reduced harm but judge credibility through specific, understandable and verifiable evidence, filtered by knowledge and accessibility.
RQ2: What claim-, brand- and consumer-related cues lead consumers to perceive sustainability marketing as greenwashing?	T3, T4, T5 (supported by T2)	Suspicion develops from vague or selective claims, weak evidence, promotional framing, inconsistent brand behaviour, prior criticism and consumer/social context.
RQ3: How does perceived greenwashing shape trust and subsequent behavioural responses?	T6, T7 (contextual support from T5)	Greenwashing weakens claim and brand trust, increases scepticism and comparison, but practical needs can sustain purchasing; trust repair requires correction and repeated evidence over time.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study offers an integrated interpretive account of how Signalling Theory and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) can be used together to understand consumers' evaluation of sustainability marketing in the fast-fashion context. The results do not offer a new theoretical mechanism but rather illustrate the complementary explanations the two perspectives offer in terms of participants' judgements about credibility, greenwashing and trust.

Signalling Theory provides insights into the consumer's reaction to the information asymmetry that exists between him/her and a fast-fashion company. Consumers have little direct information about sourcing, materials, production and environmental impacts, and they use information cues that they can observe in order to assess sustainability. This was generally accepted to be the case in the interviews, where claims were considered more positive when they were specific, measurable, consistent and verifiable, in line with the signalling perspective of Connelly et al. (2011). The results also show that the usefulness of a signal was related to its accessibility and

interpretability. Participants posed questions about percentages with no identifiable base, information that was hard to understand and evidence that was hard to find. Therefore, the results indicate that the credibility of the signal can be affected not just as a result of the presence of supporting evidence, but also because consumers cannot meaningfully interpret and evaluate the evidence.

The Persuasion Knowledge Model offers a complementary explanation by considering the intentions behind consumers' sustainability communication interpretations. Participants weren't just asked to pass judgment on whether a claim was substantiated, they were asked to consider the rationale behind the brand's presentation of facts or information, and the purpose of the communication. The communication of sustainability sometimes involved reference to image management, promotional framing, emotional language and selective presentation of positive environmental information, indicating that sometimes consumers used their perception of marketing tactics instead of the actual content of the communication. This is similar to what Friestad and Wright (1994) suggested: consumers use their knowledge of persuasion to understand marketers' intent.

In combination the two theoretical points of view offer a comprehensive picture of the participants' answers. Consumers seemed to be concerned both with the quality of the sustainability information and the perceived purpose of sustainability information. These assessments did not have to be distinct evaluation or assessment in sequence. It is possible for factual information to be part of a claim but also raise suspicion if participants thought the information was presented in a specific way or was exaggerated. On the other hand, there were instances when the brands did not make sweeping sustainability statements, but rather accepted the potential for small-scale environmental improvements, and participants tended to be more receptive to those brands. In this study, we show the interaction between the process of evaluating the evidence and the process of perceiving persuasive intent to influence perceptions of greenwashing, but we do not claim to have established a new causal mechanism.

The results also provide interpretations to the link between perceived greenwashing, trust, and behaviour. But diminished trust did not necessarily lead to total rejection of purchase. Participants might still be skeptical about sustainability communication, but they are still buying due to price, style, convenience, fit or product need. It is not the task of the contribution here, rather, to

demonstrate for this qualitative sample that trust and continued purchasing of sustainability communication are possible. This will give a more context-oriented understanding of the impact of greenwashing perceptions on consumer response in fast fashion.

5.4 Managerial and Practical Implications

The results are relevant to fast-fashion companies, sustainability teams, marketing managers and e-commerce designers. First, sustainability claims should be looked at as information for consumers and not just as promotional language. Words like “responsible”, “conscious” or “better for the planet” can raise suspicion if they are not backed by some explanation right away. It is also clear that a lack of clarity and substantiation is a matter of concern to the regulators, as evidenced by the CMA's interventions regarding environmental claims made by large fashion brands in the UK (CMA, 2024).

Second, the transparency needs to be based on consumer shopping behaviour. While having a technically detailed sustainability report is good, it is not a substitute for clear evidence on the product-page level. Consumers must be able to see what has been changed, how much it has been improved, what material or process it is related to, and where they can look for proof of further improvement. Especially for mobile and time constrained shopping.

Third, it is important to be consistent throughout the channels. Claims of varying strength should not be made on product pages, labels, advertisements, on social media, or in the context of corporate sustainability reporting. When the messages contradict, consumers might reinterpret even accurate information as a strategic image management. Last but not least, it's important for brands to understand that trust repair is an ongoing process. If a claim is disputed, a general apology or new campaign is not likely to regain credibility. The likelihood of rebuilding trust is higher if there are correction, explanation, independent support and consistent future communication.

5.5 Recommendations for Fast-Fashion E-Commerce

From the results, structured claim-governance is the road to take for fast-fashion online retailers. Product-level sustainability statements should not communicate the entire product or brand as being “sustainable” but rather that it is sustainable with a specific feature. When percentages are

used, the base and what is being compared must be known. If applicable, mention and reference recognised certification or independent standards.

Layered disclosure should also be used by retailers. The main product page should include a brief, easily-digested description, with a prominent link for customers seeking more information, such as methodology, sources or technical evidence. This is a response to the result: Transparency must be accessible and available.

Audits are needed to ensure consistency is maintained in e-commerce pages, social media, advertising and sustainability reports. Both sustainability and marketing teams need to have a review before the claims are published, so as to minimise the risk of using promotional language that exceeds what is available in the evidence. Brands should not overuse green hues, nature imagery, or un-defined badges without providing clear information.

It is also recommended to have a formal green-claim correction process. If a claim is set under dispute, or the meaning is not clear, the retailer should correct the claim publicly, provide clear explanation of the change, maintain access to supporting evidence and track if similar issues are found elsewhere in the site. Remember that trust recovery is a process and not an event. The recommendations are aligned with the literature evidence that the negative effects of perceived greenwashing on trust, loyalty and purchase intentions (Akturan, 2018; Promalessy and Handriana, 2024; Isac et al., 2025).

Table: Recommended actions for fast-fashion e-commerce sustainability communication

Recommendation	Practical action	Expected benefit
Use precise claim wording	State exactly what material, process or product feature has improved and avoid broad unsupported terms.	Reduces ambiguity and perceived exaggeration.
Provide layered evidence	Show concise evidence on the product page and link to detailed methodology, standards or sourcing information.	Improves accessibility and verifiability.
Explain numbers in context	Provide baselines, comparison periods and scope when using percentages or reduction claims.	Prevents technically precise but misleading impressions.
Audit claims across channels	Align product pages, social media, advertising, labels and corporate reporting before publication.	Builds consistency and reduces contradiction.

Use independent support where possible	Reference recognised certification, external standards or verifiable third-party evidence.	Strengthens signal credibility.
Create a trust-repair protocol	Correct disputed claims publicly, explain the problem and demonstrate sustained changes in later communication.	Supports gradual rebuilding of consumer trust.

5.6 Limitations

Limitations of this study should be taken into account when interpreting the study. The qualitative sample was 15 UK fast fashion consumers who were selected purposefully. The study was not conducted to provide statistical generalisation, and so the findings should not be taken as a reflection of the prevalence of specific views throughout the UK population. Secondly, it may be that, through self-selection, the participants included people with a greater interest in sustainability or brand communication than other consumers.

Another restriction is the influence and the interpretive bias of the researcher. Reflexive thematic analysis and an interpretivist approach were used in the study, so that the researcher did not play the role of a neutral observer in the coding, theme development and interpretation process. The researcher's assumptions and preconceived notions of greenwashing and sustainability marketing might have been related to making decisions as to which extracts to focus on, the grouping of codes, and the naming of themes.

Forth, the data collected from the interviews are based on the individuals' perceptions of, and intended responses to, the questions. Some accounts may then have been influenced by social desirability and recall. Again, online semi-structured interviews offer flexibility and privacy, but may fall short in providing contextual observation when compared to face-to-face shopping research. Fifth, the study was based on the consumers' perceptions on potential greenwashing and did not measure the environmental performance of the named brands nor identify whether there was an objective misrepresentation in any particular claim. This boundary is crucial as it is important to differentiate between the feeling of greenwashing and actual corporate misconduct and its respective consequences.

Last but not least, the study took place in the context of fast fashion in the UK. The regulatory conditions and brand familiarity are different in the respective countries and fashion segments, as is the environmental knowledge and media attention. The results are thus not necessarily transferable in an analytical sense, but rather in certain contexts.

5.7 Future Research Directions

There are several ways that the study could be extended in the future. Longitudinal qualitative research might take a look at consumer trust following a greenwashing controversy and whether or not trust is restored post correction and/or enhanced disclosure. This would be the sort of work that would respond to the temporal process outlined by participants within the scope of this study.

In a larger sample of the UK population, the present themes could be used to build instruments to measure claim specificity, evidence accessibility, perceived persuasive motive and recovery of trust, and test the relationships between them using mixed-method research. Experimental analyses might test various product-page designs, such as ambiguous labels, percentage-based claims, certification- or layered evidence-based claims to see if any communication formats help consumers better understand the products without leading them to become overconfident.

It would also be helpful to do cross-country research as the regulations, fashion culture and consumer knowledge vary across markets. Comparative studies might consider if the claim, brand and consumer cues found in this study are the same in European, Asian and emerging market contexts. Future research might also compare the brand of fast fashion with premium, luxury and sustainable-fashion brands, in which consumers might have their own respective expectations of price, durability and corporate responsibility.

Last, but not least, a shift in research from purchase intention to actual purchase behaviour indicators is needed, including repeat purchases, switching, willingness to pay, complaint behaviour, and negative word of mouth. This would fill a gap between the expressed ethical attitudes and observed consumption behaviour found in previous studies (Diddi et al., 2019; Rausch and Kopplin, 2021).

5.8 Conclusion

This dissertation explored the interpretation of sustainability marketing by UK fast-fashion consumers, the formation of perceptions of greenwashing and how these perceptions relate to trust

and purchasing behaviour. The results indicate that consumers do not consider sustainability claims separately. Rather, they focus on the language used in the claim, supporting evidence (quality and availability), experience with the brand, broader business practices, social media information, and their own shopping experience.

The study also shows that perceived 'greenwashing' goes beyond a single marketing message. After losing their trust, consumers might be less receptive to future sustainability communication, doubt the brand's intent, and are less likely to be loyal. But, if consumers lose trust in a brand, this does not always equate to an instant decision to avoid purchasing the product, as other factors such as price, convenience, style and product need also factor into the purchase decision. The effects of greenwashing are thus behavioural, relational.

The study combines Signalling Theory with the Persuasion Knowledge Model, providing a detailed explanation of evaluation of the quality of sustainability signals and perceived motives of the signals. It also demonstrates that the perception of greenwashing is a result of the interaction of the characteristics of the claim, the behaviour of the brand and the interpretation of the consumer. The study thus helps to understand the greenwashing phenomenon as a process of credibility judgement, not just an answer to misinformation about the concept with words. The results emphasize the importance of communicating responsibly and transparently for fast-fashion companies if they want to keep their consumers' confidence or regain it.

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Appendix-1: Interview Guide

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Research Title

Consumer Perceptions of Greenwashing and Trust in Sustainability Marketing by UK Fast-Fashion Brands.

Researcher Information

Researcher Name:	Md. Abdur Rahman Sayem
University:	University of Wales Trinity St David - London
Programme:	MBA International Business
Research:	Consumer Perceptions of Greenwashing and Trust in Sustainability Marketing by UK Fast-Fashion Brands.

Interview Duration

Approximately 35–50 minutes

Interview Mode

Online via: _____

Participant Information

Participant Code: _____

Date: _____

Interview Information

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.

My name is Abdur, and I am conducting this research as part of my Master's dissertation at University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

The purpose of this research is to understand how UK consumers view sustainability claims made by fast-fashion brands and how possible greenwashing may affect their trust and buying decisions.

The interview will take approximately 35–50 minutes and will be conducted online, according to the agreed interview arrangement.

Participation is entirely voluntary. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your own opinions and experiences. All information you provide will be treated confidentially and anonymously and will only be used for academic research purposes.

With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded solely to support accurate transcription and analysis.

Interviewer clarification regarding greenwashing

If the participant is unfamiliar with the term “greenwashing” or asks what it means, explain:

Greenwashing means giving an environmentally responsible image that may be exaggerated, misleading, or not fully supported by the company's actual actions.

Do you agree to participate in the interview?

Yes / No

Do you agree to the interview being audio-recorded?

Yes / No

Interviewer Guidance

The questions below provide a guide for the semi-structured interview. Follow-up questions or probes may be used where appropriate to clarify participants' responses or explore their experiences in greater depth. If a participant has already addressed a later question in sufficient detail while responding to an earlier question, the same point does not need to be repeated unnecessarily.

Section A: Participant Background and Fast-Fashion Shopping

Participant Background Information

Participant Code:

Age group:

Gender:

Employment status/occupation:

Highest level of education:

Frequency of purchasing fast-fashion clothing:

Most recent experience of seeing or responding to a fast-fashion sustainability claim:

Main fast-fashion brands usually purchased from:

Usual shopping method: Online / In-store / Both

Question 1

How would you describe the way you normally shop for fast-fashion clothing and what influences your choice of brands and products?

Section B: Understanding Sustainability Claims

Question 2

What do sustainability terms such as “sustainable,” “eco-friendly” or “responsible” mean to you when you see fast-fashion brands using them on websites, product labels, social media or other marketing materials?

Question 3

What can you tell me about a sustainability claim from a fast-fashion brand that you found believable or credible, and what made you view it that way?

Question 4

What can you tell me about a sustainability claim from a fast-fashion brand that made you feel uncertain, doubtful or suspicious, and what caused that reaction?

Section C: Perceptions of Greenwashing

Question 5

What usually makes you think that a fast-fashion brand's sustainability message might be exaggerated or misleading?

Question 6

How does your previous knowledge or experience of a fast-fashion brand influence the way you judge its sustainability claims?

Question 7

What makes a fast-fashion brand's sustainability efforts seem genuine to you?

Section D: Trust and Consumer Behaviour**Question 8**

What makes you trust a fast-fashion brand's sustainability claims, and how can possible greenwashing damage that trust?

Question 9

If your trust in a fast-fashion brand changed because of possible greenwashing, how would that affect what you do when buying from that brand?

Question 10

What could a fast-fashion brand do after suspected greenwashing to regain your trust and encourage you to buy from it again?

Section E: Closing Question**Question 11**

What else do you think is important about fast-fashion sustainability claims, greenwashing, trust, scepticism or purchasing decisions that we have not discussed?

Closing Remark

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. Your responses will help this research understand how consumers view sustainability claims and greenwashing in the UK fast-fashion industry and how these perceptions may influence trust and purchasing decisions.

Your responses will remain confidential and anonymous and will only be used for academic purposes.

Appendix-2: Coding Hierarchy

Parent theme	Parent theme title	Child code	Code occurrences
T1	Understanding sustainability: reduced harm but ambiguous terms	Reduced environmental harm	6
T1	Understanding sustainability: reduced harm but ambiguous terms	Need for clear definition	10
T2	Credibility through specificity, evidence and verification	Specific/measurable detail	24
T2	Credibility through specificity, evidence and verification	Clear/accessible information	18
T2	Credibility through specificity, evidence and verification	Verification/independent support	35
T2	Credibility through specificity, evidence and verification	Honest limits/boundaries	9
T3	Greenwashing cues: vagueness, imagery and selective claims	Vague/broad wording	11
T3	Greenwashing cues: vagueness, imagery and selective claims	Green imagery/symbols	14
T3	Greenwashing cues: vagueness, imagery and selective claims	Missing/weak evidence	9
T3	Greenwashing cues: vagueness, imagery and selective claims	Selective disclosure/context	10
T3	Greenwashing cues: vagueness, imagery and selective claims	Promotional/emotional framing	20
T4	Brand consistency, history and business-model fit	Prior experience/reputation	9
T4	Brand consistency, history and business-model fit	Consistency across time/channels	32
T4	Brand consistency, history and business-model fit	Wider business-behaviour fit	6
T5	Consumer knowledge, social media and practical shopping context	Price/convenience/style/need	44
T5	Consumer knowledge, social media and practical shopping context	Consumer knowledge/literacy	11
T5	Consumer knowledge, social media and practical shopping context	Social media/influencers	14
T5	Consumer knowledge, social media and practical shopping context	Time/accessibility constraints	22

T6	Greenwashing erodes trust and spreads scepticism	Claim-level distrust	21
T6	Greenwashing erodes trust and spreads scepticism	Spillover to brand/future claims	11
T6	Greenwashing erodes trust and spreads scepticism	Generalised scepticism	4
T7	Behaviour after greenwashing: cautious buying and conditional trust repair	Hesitation/comparison/switching	10
T7	Behaviour after greenwashing: cautious buying and conditional trust repair	Reduced purchasing	5
T7	Behaviour after greenwashing: cautious buying and conditional trust repair	Continued buying despite distrust	10
T7	Behaviour after greenwashing: cautious buying and conditional trust repair	Correction/apology	18
T7	Behaviour after greenwashing: cautious buying and conditional trust repair	Sustained evidence for recovery	18

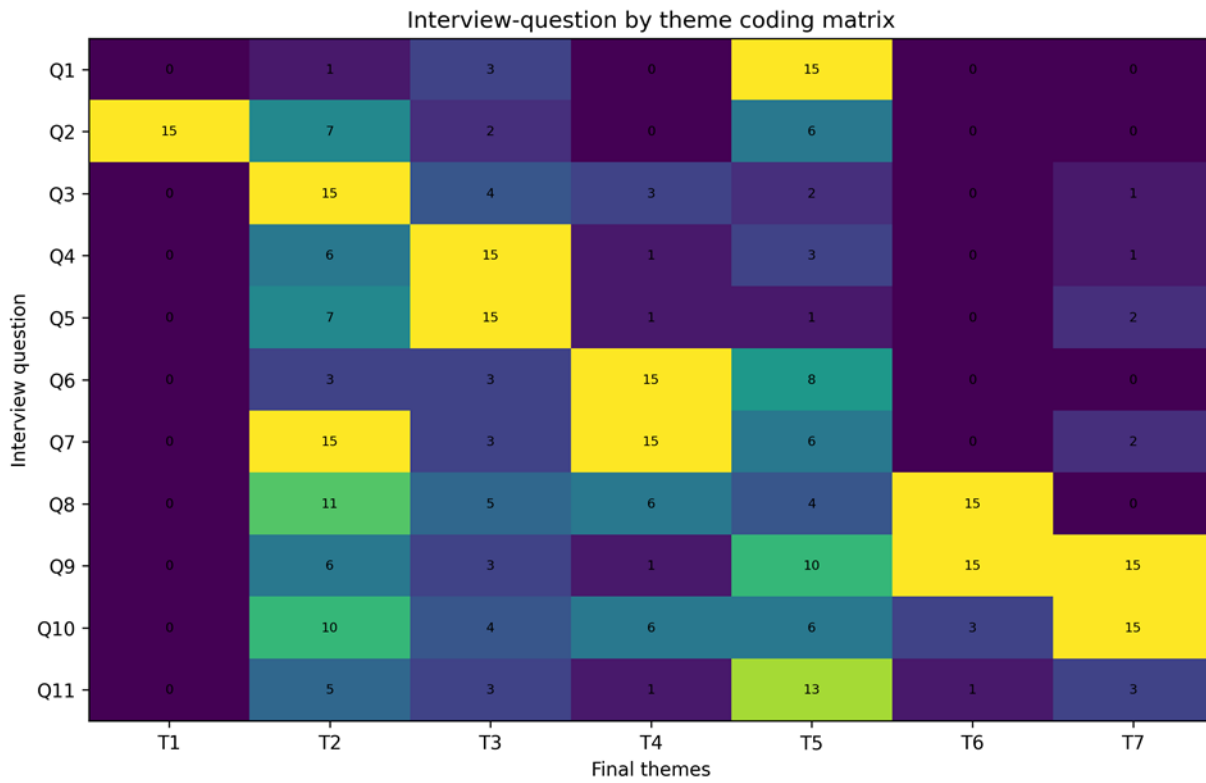
Appendix-3 Participant-by-Theme Coding Matrix

Participant-by-theme coding matrix

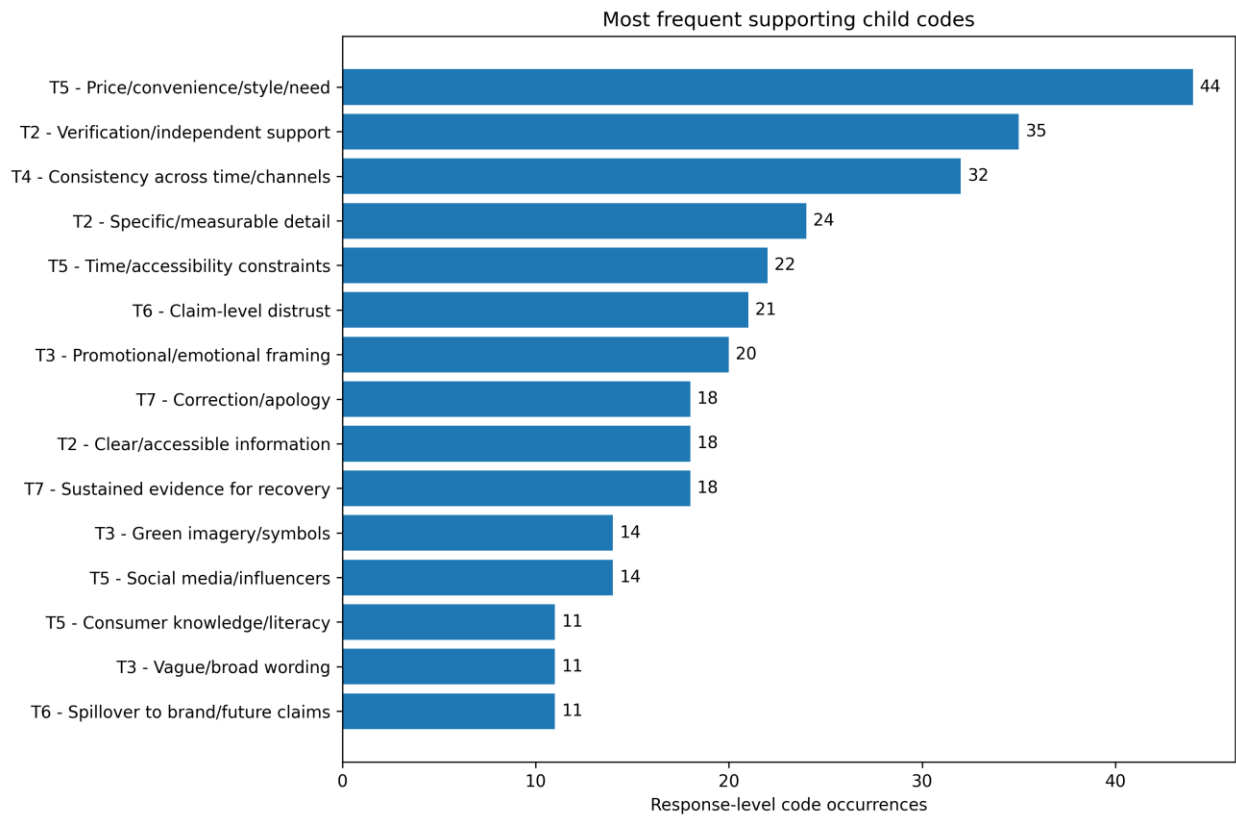
Participant	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7
P1	1	6	5	3	6	3	4
P2	1	6	7	3	3	3	2
P3	1	7	2	6	3	3	2
P4	1	5	2	3	6	2	2
P5	1	3	5	2	7	2	3
P6	1	8	3	5	4	2	3
P7	1	5	6	2	10	2	2
P8	1	4	3	2	7	2	2
P9	1	11	2	3	4	2	5
P10	1	2	4	2	3	2	3
P11	1	8	5	4	4	2	2
P12	1	4	7	2	5	2	2
P13	1	5	2	4	4	2	2
P14	1	9	4	4	3	3	2
P15	1	3	3	4	5	2	3
	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7

Final themes

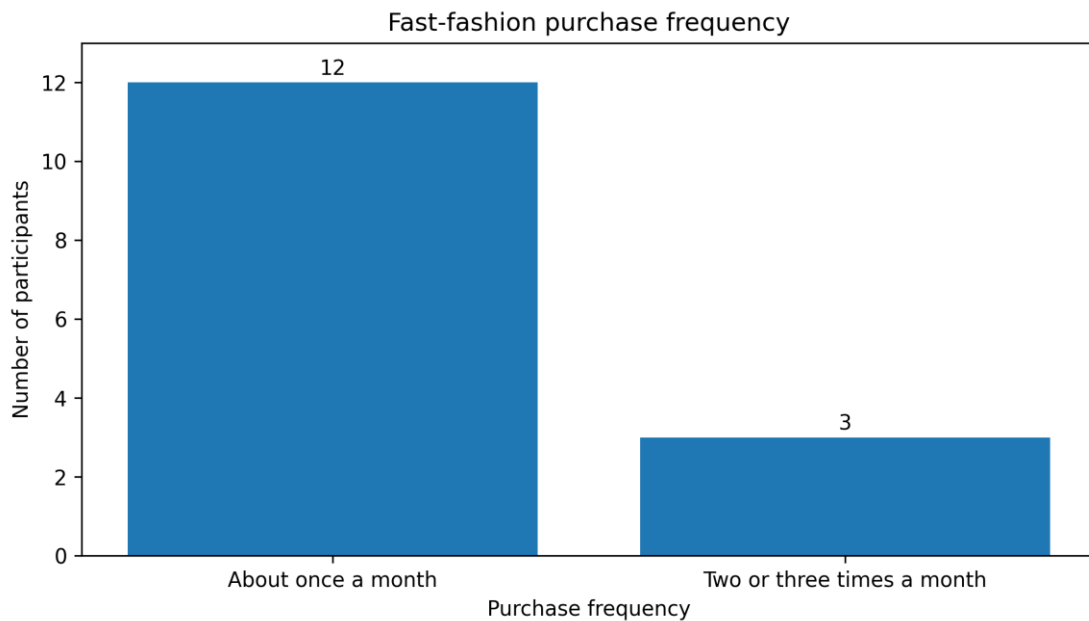
Appendix-4: Interview-Question-by-Theme Coding Matrix

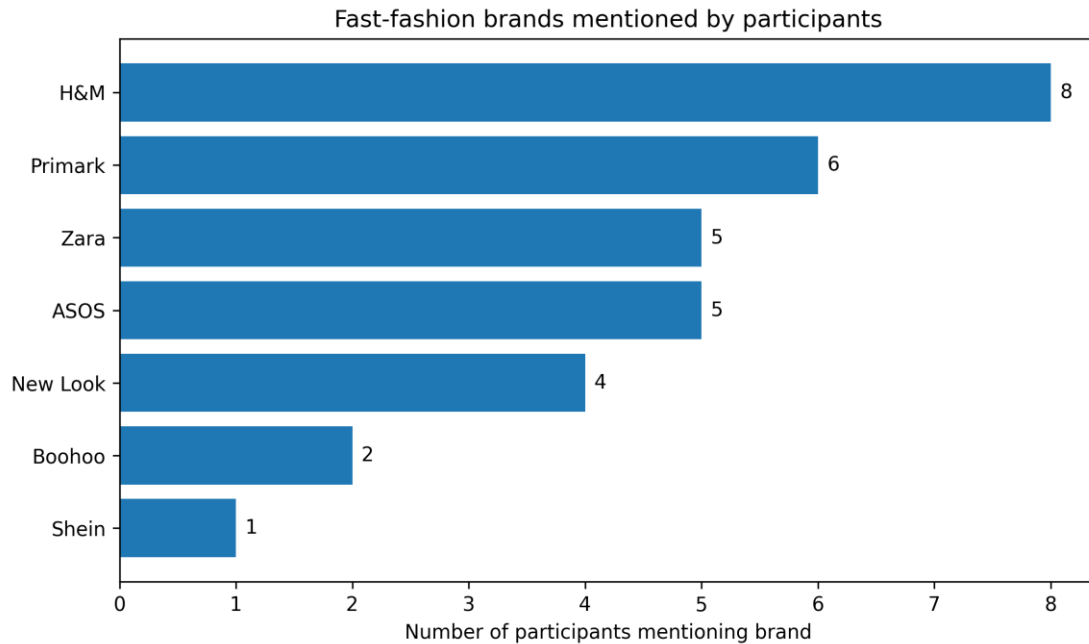


Appendix-5 Supporting Child-Code Distribution



Appendix-6: Additional Participant-Profile Figures





Appendix-7: Transcript

Participant P2

Participant Code	P2
Age Group	25-34
Gender	Male
Employment / Occupation	Retail assistant
Highest Level of Education	College diploma
Fast-Fashion Purchase Frequency	Two or three times a month
Main Brands Usually Purchased	Zara, ASOS
Usual Shopping Method	Both

Question 1: How would you describe the way you normally shop for fast-fashion clothing and what influences your choice of brands and products?

P2: I shop both online and in stores, usually Zara or ASOS. I compare fit, price and how quickly I can get the item. I notice sustainability messages, but they rarely decide the purchase by themselves.

Question 2: What do sustainability terms such as “sustainable,” “eco-friendly” or “responsible” mean to you when you see fast-fashion brands using them on websites, product labels, social media or other marketing materials?

P2: I understand them as signs that a product may use recycled materials, better sourcing or lower environmental impact. However, I do not assume the claim is true just because a green label appears on the page.

Question 3: What can you tell me about a sustainability claim from a fast-fashion brand that you found believable or credible, and what made you view it that way?

P2: I once saw a product page that clearly listed the fabric mix and explained which part was recycled. I trusted that more because the claim was limited and specific instead of saying the whole product was sustainable.

Question 4: What can you tell me about a sustainability claim from a fast-fashion brand that made you feel uncertain, doubtful or suspicious, and what caused that reaction?

P2: I have seen claims that say a collection is better for the planet without explaining why. That makes me suspicious because the wording sounds large, but the product page gives very little information to support it.

Question 5: What usually makes you think that a fast-fashion brand's sustainability message might be exaggerated or misleading?

P2: I question a message when it makes a big environmental promise without numbers, sources or a clear explanation. I also get suspicious if the claim appears only in advertising and not in detailed product information.

Question 6: How does your previous knowledge or experience of a fast-fashion brand influence the way you judge its sustainability claims?

P2: My previous experience matters because I already have an idea of how the brand communicates. If it normally gives useful product information, I trust new claims more. If not, I start from a more doubtful position.

Question 7: What makes a fast-fashion brand's sustainability efforts seem genuine to you?

P2: I think genuine effort means the brand gives clear details and does not only talk about sustainability during promotions. Consistent information across products, reports and social media makes the message feel more serious and less temporary.

Question 8: What makes you trust a fast-fashion brand's sustainability claims, and how can possible greenwashing damage that trust?

P2: Trust comes from clear details, consistency and information I can check. If I discover that one sustainability message was misleading, I start questioning the brand more generally and become less willing to accept future claims.

Question 9: If your trust in a fast-fashion brand changed because of possible greenwashing, how would that affect what you do when buying from that brand?

P2: I would become more selective rather than immediately stop buying. I would check alternatives, read product details and avoid paying extra because of a sustainability claim unless I felt the information was reliable again.

Question 10: What could a fast-fashion brand do after suspected greenwashing to regain your trust and encourage you to buy from it again?

P2: The brand should explain the issue directly, correct any misleading wording and provide clear proof for future claims. I would also want to see the change continue for several months before fully trusting it again.

Question 11: What else do you think is important about fast-fashion sustainability claims, greenwashing, trust, scepticism or purchasing decisions that we have not discussed?

P2: Convenience is important as well as trust. I may question a sustainability message but still use the brand because delivery, size range or price works for me. That makes consumer behaviour more complicated than simply trusting or avoiding.

Appendix-8: Consent Form



Participation Consent Form

University of Wales Trinity Saint David (c

Participant Identification **P6**

Number:

PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM (for researcher to fill)	
Project Title: Consumer Perceptions of Greenwashing and Trust in Sustainability Marketing by UK Fast-Fashion Brands.	
Name of Researcher: Md Abdur Rahman Sayem	Name of Supervisor: Dr Jean Wang
Email of Researcher: 2503775@student.uwtsd.ac.uk	
Aim of Research: To explore how UK fast-fashion consumers perceive sustainability marketing claims and how perceived greenwashing influences their brand trust, scepticism and purchase attitudes.	

(for participant to fill)		YES	NO
1	I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated 25/06/26 for the above study.	✓	
2	I understand there are no material benefits for participating.	✓	
2	I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	✓	
3	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.	✓	
4	I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, articles or presentations by the researcher.	✓	
5	I consent for my name and title to be used within this study.	✓	
	Where applicable, I understand that my details will not be anonymous.	✓	
6	I agree to be recorded (audio and/or audio-visual video).	✓	

7	I agree to take part in the above study.					
Researcher's Name (Print)	Md Abdur Rahman Sayem	Signature 	Md Abdur Rahman Sayem	Date	25/07/26	
Participant's Name (Print)	Shanto	Signature	Shanto	Date	01/09/26	

You may decline to participate in this study. You may end your participation in this study at any time. All data generated from this or any interview will remain confidential. For more information, please view the university's [Research and Data Management Policy](#).

When completed please email a copy to the below address to be kept on the file of the researcher and retain a copy for yourself.

Subject Title: **[NAME OF PARTICIPANT] – Participant Consent Form**

Email: 2503775@student.uwtsd.ac.uk