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# Good Guy versus Bad Guy: How are Patagonia's and H&M's Green(wash)ing Strategies Perceived among Consumers?

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to further investigate and understand the influence of greenwashing on green brand associations, green brand image, brand credibility, and finally green brand equity. Therefore, the paper builds up on Akturan's (2018) findings and partially replicates them by using the two fashion brands H&M and Patagonia.

**Methodology:** To fulfill the papers' purpose, one focus groups was conducted to evaluate the consumers' perception of the two fashion brands. The paper also contains case descriptions to further explore the respective brands and existing literature and theory to have a solid foundation when answering the research questions.

**Findings:** The paper finds that green brand associations, green brand image, brand credibility, and therefore green brand equity are negatively influenced by greenwashing when the considered fashion brand is a perceived greenwasher. However, when the considered fashion brand is not perceived to be greenwashing no negative effect can be found.

**Limitations:** The study only conducted one focus group and is only focused on two fashion brands. Hence, more research is needed to generalize the findings.

**Implications:** Only one collection dedicated to sustainability is harmful for a brand regarding green brand associations, green brand image, brand credibility and consequently green brand equity. At the same time, fashion brands that are already perceived as green brands should not emphasize one product line to be especially environmentally friendly as this leads consumer to accuse the brand of greenwashing. Also, managers should emphasize transparency and an external focus when greening a brand.

**Original/value:** Industry-specific research on greenwashing is limited. To our knowledge, this study represents the first of its kind to examine fashion brands. However, the papers' basis is a previous study from Akturan (2018) that explores the relationship among greenwashing, green brand equity, brand credibility, green brand associations and purchase intention using refrigerators and tissue papers.

**Keywords:** Greenwashing, Green brand associations, Green brand image, Brand credibility, Green brand equity, Fashion industry, H&M, Patagonia

**Paper type:** Research paper

## Introduction

The increased attention towards the climate crisis over the past years directed companies all over the planet to focus on environmentally sustainable business strategies and activities to enter new consumer segments and markets, boost revenues and achieve and maintain a competitive advantage (Chen, 2010; Nidumolu, Prahalad & Rangaswami, 2009). In 2019, the “Fridays For Future” movement led young adults around the world to draw attention to climate change and environmental pollution through protests and strikes (Wallis & Loy, 2021).

However, the approach to integrate environmental issues in marketing strategies is not brand-new (McDaniel & Rylander, 1993). At the beginning of the 1990s, consumers’ awareness and purchase intention towards eco-friendly products started to intensify (Chen, 2010). “The rise of [this] consumer environmentalism” (Chen, Lai & Wen, 2006, p. 331) piloted organizations worldwide to adapt on green marketing strategies (Chen, 2010) to “promote products by employing environmental claims either about their attributes or about their systems, policies and processes” (Prakash, 2002, p. 285). For example, these claims can reach from “environmentally-friendly shopping choices” to “conscious products” (H&M, 2021a). Even though some of the claims might be true, some companies are portraying themselves and their products as more environmentally friendly by providing inaccurate or misleading information to consumers. This marketing method is called: greenwashing (Kenton, 2021).

Prior research argues that the perception of greenwashing negatively impacts consumers' intentions to purchase (Zhang, Li, Cao & Huang, 2018; Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017). Furthermore, Chen, Huang, Wang and Chen (2020) show that greenwashing negatively influences a brands' image as well as consumers' loyalty towards the respective brand. In the case consumers are aware of greenwashing, their

attitude and behavior regarding the brand is negatively affected (de Jong, M. D. T., Harkink & Barth, 2018). Also, greenwashed products have a negative effect on the brands' credibility and on consumers' associations with respect to the brand. This is particularly relevant for high-involvement products (Akturan, 2018). Although some research efforts in the area of greenwashing are undertaken, further investigation is needed. For this reason, this paper seeks to further investigate and understand the influence of greenwashing on the brand credibility, green brand associations, green brand image and finally green brand equity by building up on Akturan's (2018) findings using different product categories and different cultural contexts. This paper focuses on the fashion industry and European culture, and aims to answer the following questions:

- (1) How does green(wash)ing affect consumers' green brand associations?
- (2) How does green(wash)ing affect consumers' brand credibility?
- (3) How does green(wash)ing affect consumers' brand image and the brand equity?

To answer these questions, a focus group was used to evaluate consumers' perception of two clothing brands, namely Patagonia and H&M. In a first step, this paper will give a brief overview of the relevant theory and existing literature. Secondly, the paper will shed light on the case descriptions and methodology. Thirdly, the empirical findings will be analyzed and discussed. Finally, the paper concludes with some reflections on possible implications for researchers and practitioners and will give an outlook towards further research contexts.

## Literature Review

### *Green(wash)ing*

According to Hartmann, Ibáñez and Sainz (2005), ‘greening’ or ‘green branding’ means “an active communication and differentiation of the brand from its

competitors through the environmentally sound attributes” (p.10). Greening can be done through integrating eco-friendly attributes or eliciting a feeling of well-being (Ritov & Kahnemann, 1997). The goal of greening is to appeal towards rising environmental awareness among consumers, build a better brand image and to differentiate a brand from its competitors (Hartmann & Ibáñez, 2006).

In opposite to greening, there is greenwashing. ‘Greenwashing’ originally comes from ‘whitewashing’, which meaning is as following: to conceal or to disguise (Akturan, 2018). The term greenwashing is used to mark “insincere, dubious, inflated or misleading environmental claims” (Cherry & Sneirson, 2012, p. 141). Greenwashing can best be described as a company creatively managing its reputation, in which they hide discrepancy regarding their ecological footprint (Laufer, 2003).

Within the practice of greenwashing, three acts can be distinguished: confusion, fronting and posturing (Laufer, 2003). Confusion may be caused by restricting or administering information that go out to external controls (Laufer, 2003). Fronting is practiced by weakening the seriousness of environmental issues, communicating exaggerated claims, evoking “green” associations through image advertising, stressing uncertainty about environmental issues, questioning available solutions to environmental issues and/or rebranding to clear any negative environmental associations with the brand (Laufer, 2003). Posturing is practiced by initiating alliances to support or debate legislation and resolutions in the environmental field, and to investigate, and determine or reconsider industry principles (Laufer, 2003).

Whereas honest greening is meant to contribute to a better brand image, some companies manipulate consumers through greenwashing as they know that a perceived green brand evokes positive feelings

leading to better feelings for customers when they assume they are buying green products (Hartmann & Ibáñez, 2006). However, when exposed, greenwashing shows only downsides, which are not only limited to greenwashing companies but also affect other companies. Greenwashing negatively impacts consumers’ perceptions and behaviours, strenghtening green scepticism and perceived risk (Lin, Lobo & Leckie, 2017; Chang & Chen, 2014). The growth of greenwashing in the past years has caused increased suspicion among customers and has led to consumers being more cynical about greening efforts, whether it is actually greening or greenwashing (Johnstone & Tan, 2015; Self, Self & Bell-Haynes, 2010). Next to negatively affecting consumer behaviour, greenwashing has negatively impacts brand credibility and perceived performance of the organization (Nyilasy, Gangadharbatla & Paladino, 2014). Furthermore, greenwashing is also proven to have a negative influence on green brand equity (Akturan, 2018).

### *Green Brand Associations*

Low and Lamb (2000) define brand associations as a brand memory that contains anything that is connected to the brand in consumer’s minds.

The literature theorizes two different concepts about how customers acquire brand associations (Akturan, 2018). The first concept is the human association memory theory. According to this concept, the nerve nodes in our brain increasingly connect as information arise together (Anderson, Bothell, Lebiere & Matessa, 1998; Keller, 1993). The second concept is the adaptive network theory. Here, brand associations are acquired unconsciously through the process of classical conditioning (Janiszewski & van Osselaer, 2000).

According to Low and Lamb (2000), the goal of marketing managers is to foster and enhance positive brand attitudes and to influence customers positively in their

buying behavior. Meanwhile, customers tend to rely on brand associations to organize, recapture and classify brand-related information (Low & Lamb, 2000).

Building on the more general conceptualization of brand associations, Ng, Butt, Khong and Ong (2014) describe green brand associations as connections consumers make to environmentally friendly attributes and positionings of products and brands.

Akturan (2018) demonstrated in his paper that green brand associations have a positive impact on green brand equity. In addition, greenwashing was found to have a negative impact on the association with green brands, with greenwashing having a greater impact on associations when consumers face products with a high involvement compared to products with a low involvement (Akturan, 2018).

### *Green Brand Image*

Brand image as defined by Keller (1993), describes the perception of a brand as it is expressed in the brand associations within the minds of consumers. Cretu and Brodie (2007) further enhance this definition by describing it as the consumers' mental picture of a brand including symbolic meanings. Hence, it can be summarized that brand image covers functional, symbolic and experiential benefits (Park, Jaworski & MacInnis, 1986). Based on the aforementioned definitions, Chen (2010) explained green brand image as a “set of perceptions of a brand in a consumer’s mind that is linked to environmental commitments and environmental concerns” (p. 312).

Moreover, Chen (2010) also showed in his paper that green brand image positively influences green brand equity. In other words, the green brand image increases the value of the brand and enhances the green brand equity (Bekk, Spörrle, Hedjasie & Kerschreiter, 2016). Furthermore, Laufer (2003) demonstrated that greenwashing harms a company’s green

brand image and therefore has a negative relation.

### *Brand Credibility*

Erdem, Swait and Valenzuela (2006) define brand credibility as

“the believability of the product information contained in a brand, which requires that consumers perceive the brand having the ability (i.e. expertise) and willingness (i.e. trustworthiness) to deliver continuously what has been promised” (p. 35).

Brand credibility can be built by financial investments in the brand, consistency in the components of the marketing-mix and clarity (Erdem & Swait, 1998). Consistency is straining after similarity in any marketing actions and strategies (Erdem, Swait & Valenzuela, 2006). Clarity is providing clear information, leaving no room for different interpretation (Baek, Kim & Yu, 2010). Credibility has been difficult to build in green marketing due to cynicism, confusion and mistrust (Mendleson & Polonsky, 1995).

When building a green brand, a high brand credibility is of importance because it influences green perceived value, green brand image (Ng et al., 2014), perceived quality and brand equity in a positive way (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Papasolomou & Vrontis, 2006).

### *Green Brand Equity*

The concept of brand equity has been defined in various ways in the marketing literature (Ha, 2020; Keller, 1993; Keller & Brexendorf, 2017). For example, Keller (1993) defines brand equity as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (p.8), where brand knowledge includes brand image and brand awareness (Keller, 1993). Keller and Brexendorf (2017) suggests that brand equity is “the

'added value' endowed to a product in the thoughts, words, and actions of consumers" (p. 2). This added value operates as "a brand signal to consumers" (Erdem & Swait, 1998, p. 132) in terms of boosting their quality perception and diminishing their cost of information as well as potential purchase risks (Erdem & Swait, 1998).

However, consumers' preferences are changing towards more sustainable and environmentally conscious goods and services, requiring companies to not only stress on managing brand equity in general but on managing green equity in particular (Khandelwal, Kulshreshtha & Tripathi, 2019). Chen (2010) defines green brand equity as

"a set of brand assets and liabilities about green commitments and environmental concerns linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service" (p. 310).

According to Ha (2020), a green brand image and green trust positively influence green brand equity. This is in line with Chen (2010) who postulates that green trust, green satisfaction, and a green brand image favorably affect the development of green brand equity. Moreover, Kang and Hur (2012) argue, that green brand equity is positively affected by consumers' brand loyalty and therefore likelihood to repurchase green products. In addition, green brand equity increases the consumers' intention to purchase green products especially for products with a higher involvement (Akturan, 2018).

## Case Descriptions

### *H&M*

The Swedish company Hennes & Mauritz, better known as H&M, began in 1947 under the name Hennes and initially sold women's clothing. In 1968, the company adopted the name Hennes & Mauritz after acquiring Mauritz Widfoss, a company that marketed

equipment for hunters and fishers (Ehram, 2016). The H&M fashion brand operates in more than seventy countries with a total of 4429 stores worldwide generating net sales of SEK 187,031m in the fiscal year 2019/2020. H&M's overall aim is to offer high quality, great value for money and sustainable fashion for women, men, teenagers and children enabling all of them to explore their individual style (H&M Group, 2020b).

As a matter of fact, the climate crisis increases the pressure for more sustainable and eco-friendly shopping behavior, especially in the fashion-industry (Kong, Ko, Chae & Mattila, 2016). Therefore, as H&M's head of sustainability - Leyla Ertur - states, also H&M "want[s] to use [its] size and scale to lead the change towards circular and climate positive fashion while being a fair and equal company" (H&M Group, 2020a). Hence, by 2030, the company aims to use 100% recycled or sustainably-sourced materials for their cloth and packaging to become climate positive by 2040 (H&M Group, 2020a). To achieve these goals, H&M launched its environmentally friendlier product line 'H&M Conscious Collection' in 2011 (Ehram, 2016). The fashion items of this line are marked with

"a green hangtag [and] must contain at least 50% sustainable materials, such as organic cotton and recycled polyester. The only exception is recycled cotton which, for quality reasons, can only make up 20% of a product" (H&M, 2021b).

Moreover, the fashion brand encourages its buyers online to purchase these greener clothing options as they "help [H&M to] make the fashion industry more sustainable" (H&M, 2021b).

Many brands use the color green to express their environmental friendliness (Lim, Baek, Yoon & Kim, 2020). H&M, for example, uses the color green in its communication of its Conscious Collection and labels each garment with a green hangtag. This seems to be effective as a

recent study confirms that the usage of the color green in advertisements and communications fosters consumers perception of a eco-friendly brand and increases their brand attitude and purchase intention (Lim et al., 2020).

However, in regard to the Conscious Collection, H&M has been criticized for not being transparent by the Norwegian Consumer Authority. Accordingly, by failing to provide sufficient information regarding why the garments in this collection are less polluting than others, H&M is misdirecting its consumers. The authority argues that H&M does not provide enough information to consumers to discern whether they, in fact, engage in sustainable sourcing and manufacturing or whether they are simply portraying themselves as more sustainable than they are to boost sales (Segran, 2019).

### *Patagonia*

The American company Patagonia Works, better known as Patagonia, was founded in 1973 by the climbers Yvon Chouinard and his wife Malinda Pennoyer with the mission statement to “[...] use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis” (Clayton, 2013). Hence, Ventura (2016) describes Patagonia as a pioneer in corporate environmentalism which started from being a small company that made tools for climber to a world leading outdoor brand.

Patagonia has more than 70 stores worldwide (Patagonia, 2021d). They don't publish their annual report publicly, but in a recent interview the CEO stated that Patagonia was approaching a revenue of \$1 billion worldwide in 2017 (Kahlow, 2017). A huge part of their revenue comes from their own online store, which was generating \$316 million in 2017 (Statista, 2019).

Patagonia has managed not only to become financially successful, but also to be recognized as a benefit corporation in 2012,

defining the environment as a legal goal in addition to revenue (Patagonia, 2019).

Unlike H&M, Patagonia started from the ground up with a mission to design solutions for the environment and make consumer behavior more environmentally friendly (Patagonia, 2021c).

In this way Patagonia continues to raise awareness for the environment through Black Friday campaigns such as the 2011 "Dont Buy This Jacket" campaign against consumerism or the 2016 "10 Million for the Planet" campaign where they donated all Black Friday profits to non-profit environmentally friendly organizations (Patagonia, 2011; Marcario, 2016) .

Apart from all the marketing campaigns, what has been launched annually since 1985 and continues to exist is the "1% for the Planet" self-imposed Earth Tax (Patagonia, 2021a). For over 35 years, Patagonia has donated one percent of its sales to environmental organizations and continues to try to convince companies to join in on this trend (Patagonia, 2021a).

As a result, Patagonia has set itself the goal of not only donating to green causes and reducing the environmental impact of its own production, but also sharing its green practices with other businesses (Casadesus-Masanell, Kim & Forest 2010).

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

There are two types of marketing research methods: qualitative and quantitative (Calder, 1977). To fulfil the paper's purpose, a qualitative approach was used to gain an “in-depth, [...] subjective, understanding of the consumer” (Calder, 1977, p. 353). More specifically, this study is based on a phenomenological approach through conducting focus groups to evaluate “how consumers interpret reality in their own terms” (Calder, 1977, p. 360) and to “experience the experience” (Calder, 1977, p. 360) of them.

One advantage of using focus groups are group dynamics which increase participant's security and their willingness to say what they think, feel, or perceive. However, group dynamics can also lead participants to adapt their opinion to not be socially exposed (Catterall & Maclaren, 2006). To overcome this obstacle, we decided to have a *brand obsessive group* with participants who are highly interested and knowledgeable in the category of fashion to have an *issue homogeneity* and to elicit self-confident, unmanipulated and innovative responses (Catterall & Maclaren, 2006). Moreover, the participants knew each other, contributing to a higher feeling of security and self-disclosure (Catterall & Maclaren, 2006). In addition, participants were offered snacks and drinks to make them feel more comfortable and to reduce the formality of the meeting room at LUSEM learning hub (see Appendix 1).

Generally, focus groups are recommend to involve up to eight members. Accordingly, one focus group with six participants was conducted for approximately one hour. We decided to have a small number of participants to increase the feeling of security and to offer each participant enough time to express her/his opinion (Catterall & Maclaren, 2006). As a matter of fact, participants of focus groups reveal more insights "when they are similar on key demographic and socioeconomic characteristics" (Catterall & Maclaren, 2006, p. 263). Before the focus group took place, we sent out a survey to our participants to collect the participant's demographic and socioeconomic information as well as their permission to audio-record the discussion and to make use of the recording for research purposes (see Appendix 2). Consequently, the participants had a Western European cultural background, with a majority of Dutch people. In terms of educational background, all participants were current Master's students at Lund University. The age distribution ranged from 22 to 26. Regarding the gender distribution, we have

paid attention to a balanced ratio, and thus selected three women and three men. Firstly, we wanted to ensure that the main categories of women's and men's fashion are equally covered during the discussion. Secondly, we aimed at not creating gender minorities, as these lead to the respective minority adapting the answers to the majority (Schlosser, 1997).

Another important factor that needs to be taken into account is the moderator (Morgan, 1996). We decided to have a higher involved moderator to have a more structured focus group. This means, our moderator asked specific questions and controlled the time spent on each question to fulfil our research purpose (Morgan, 1996).

Accordingly, participants were exposed to 14 questions (see Appendix 3). The first questions had a more general character and were supposed to make the participants accustomed to the topic. For instances, the participants were asked what role sustainability plays in their purchase of clothing. The following questions were then divided into three categories corresponding to our research focus and to answer our research questions: green brand associations, green brand image, and brand credibility. Furthermore, most of these questions either had a reference to H&M or Patagonia.

After the focus group was conducted, the audio recording was transcribed using the Microsoft Word transcription feature. The transcript was then used for the following analysis.

## **Findings and Analysis (2000)**

### *Green Brand Associations*

H&M aims to act as a green fashion brand that "offer[s] fashion and quality at the best price in a sustainable way" (H&M, 2021a). Therefore, it would be advantageous for H&M if the buyers have positive green brand associations in their minds as these have a positive effect on the green brand

equity (Akturan, 2018). However, when the participants were asked to talk about their associations with H&M no positively connoted sustainability-related or green associations were mentioned. The majority of participants related H&M to cheap clothing, fast fashion, low quality, and worldwide availability. What is much more noteworthy, however, is the fact that although no positively connoted green associations were mentioned, negatively connoted ones were. For instances, some respondents associated environmental and labor-concerned scandals in Bangladesh with the brand. In addition, half of the respondents connected the term greenwashing with H&M. To be able to exclude joint influence in this case, the participants had to write their associations individually on a sheet of paper before disclosing them to the group.

Furthermore, we confronted the participants with the eco-friendlier 'H&M Conscious Collection' to elicit more potentially green brand associations. Interestingly, two respondents argued that this collection is H&M's attempt to appear greener and to care about the planet. However, the majority of the group associated greenwashing with H&M and the respective collection. For instances, one participant said:

*"I was in the H&M store in Malmo last Saturday and saw the Conscious Collection, and it was really designed in a green way, also with a lot of lights and also real plants. So, you got the feeling like, oh my God, I'm doing something good when buying from here. And then over there was all the shitty stuff. For me, that's just greenwashing. So why is not all cloth conscious?"*

Patagonia is a brand that acknowledges that "[e]verything [they] make has an impact on the planet" (Patagonia, 2021b). Here, most of the respondents mentioned positively connoted green brand associations such as conscious, circular, durable, no fast fashion, and purpose-driven. Additionally, three participants connected the term premium

with the brand. Interestingly, no participant mentioned associations that could be considered as negatively connoted for a green brand. Moreover, the participants were also asked to what extent it would make sense for Patagonia to highlight a special collection that is particularly sustainable just like H&M does with its Conscious Collection. Here, participants stated that they would then also associate Patagonia with greenwashing as the question would arise as to why this collection was more sustainable than all the other collections. This was particularly clear in the way one participant answered:

*"I think it's built with sort of like the outdoor market in mind and the respect of the nature kind of ties into the values, so I think it's more of like a holistic approach [...] so they're portraying themselves to be sustainable. I think they shouldn't just have a line that's dedicated to it, otherwise it would kind of be greenwashing."*

Through this, it is clear that consumers tend to mainly associate negatively connoted green brand associations with H&M and positively connoted green brand associations with Patagonia. This is also shown by one of a participants' conclusion:

*"[...] Patagonia could be one of those friends, who is like part of your identity, like super cool and H&M is just fast fashion, your average."*

### *Green Brand Image*

As described in the theory part, the focal point is to analyse the consumer's mental picture about both H&M and Patagonia including symbolic meanings. In doing so, the focus group discussed the question if and in which way a specific product line, dedicating to be more sustainable and greener, affects the green brand image. The Conscious Collection by H&M was discussed in detail, whereby the participants elaborated that it only partially made an impact on the green brand image of H&M. The main critique was the fact that having only one specific product line dedicated to

sustainable fashion did not create a strong green brand image for the participants, when at the same time the other product lines do not support the same message. One participant described this contrast as follows:

*“Even if H&M has its conscious product line, they are still selling \$9 T-shirts. It’s a weird message and doesn’t make sense.”*

However, when it came to the question of sense, the focus group had further discussions and elaborated that it still makes sense for H&M to start with a green product line. It was mentioned that unlike Patagonia, H&M has not started as a green brand and need to develop their green brand image. Here are two quotes from the focus group illustrating their discussion:

*“We are a bit too harsh with H&M because they even try to become greener, and I mean of course they didn’t start as green companies, but now they’re trying to change.”*

*“H&M has to start with this conscious product line. Some other brands have an easier time just being green like Patagonia.”*

The findings also show that the process of creating a green brand image is a continuous process rather than a rapid one. Moreover, it shows that a turnaround cannot happen overnight. Strategies for achieving a green brand image must therefore be able to make a sustainable contribution to the financial viability of a company and generate revenue. Other than that, one of the participants emphasized that a change in marketing and in-store efforts must happen so that a higher percentage of sustainable coverage can be achieved to increase the perception of green brand image:

*“I think, of course you have to make sustainability profitable, but then you also need to have more products that are sustainable because H&M now only has the Conscious Collection and I feel like it is only small percentage of its total. I think that’s a big issue as well like if for example 50% of your products instore are*

*sustainable, then it makes more sense to focus on these products because then it can be profitable and credible.”*

Thus, the participants have stated that H&M should continue to focus on their conscious product line until it becomes viable to discontinue other less sustainable product lines. One participant in the focus group summed it up nicely as follows:

*“It also depends if they’re just doing the collection and then settle for that. They should act like -OK, we’ve done this collection and now we’re going to continue to become greener day by day.”*

Therefore, the analysis shows that it is more difficult for non-green associated brands like H&M to build and maintain a green brand image compared to green brands like Patagonia. For Patagonia, all participants indicated its green brand image and did not have further comments, as this quote from one participant shows:

*“Patagonia stands for the green world I mean like the environment is just part of them.”*

### *Brand Credibility*

We asked the focus group what their impressions were on both H&M’s and Patagonia’s efforts to be a more sustainable fashion brand and if they believe if both brands are green brands, in an attempt to discover if the brands are perceived as credible regarding their green actions. Regarding H&M, the majority of the participants considered the brand as not a green brand. They agreed that a brand that mainly focuses on cheap and fast fashion cannot be fully green. One participant expressed this as following:

*“They want to be available for as many people as possible who can’t afford the luxury fashion business, right, so they are cheap. Having a more sustainable supply chain and more sustainable products doesn’t go hand in hand with that – you can’t have both if you are still trying to be cheap, for everyone and green. Well, it is*

*not possible to be a green brand if you focus on these things.”*

Regarding Patagonia, all participants considered Patagonia as a green brand. One participant illustrated it as following:

*“I do think it’s a green brand. I think it’s a brand that truly actually want to do something better for the planet instead of capitalizing on it.”*

Furthermore, to gather any additional insights, we asked the participants to elaborate and share their opinions on how brands could build stronger credibility as a green brand. One main point that was stressed by the participants here was communicating hard facts and solutions of what the company is doing regarding good causes, e.g., donating to charities needs to be shared properly to the consumers (e.g., through social media). It needs to be shared how much was donated, what exactly the goal and effect of the donation was and what the concrete cause of the charity is. Second, the participants agreed on the major importance of total transparency in where a company is now and where they want to be over time, admitting they are not perfect, because is there one company that is really perfect? A strong quote of one of the participants regarding this matter was:

*“Be totally transparent. Say: we can’t change from today to tomorrow for 100%, just offering conscious products, because then we would go bankrupt. But we’re trying to do it step by step. Be way clearer in this communication, like: we’re not perfect, we’re not a green company yet, and maybe we’re never going to be fully green, but this is our aim.”*

In the course of the discussion, some additional points came up as important topics to think about when trying to build credibility as a green brand. Another major point was focussing on outward thinking rather than focussing on internal performance and complying with set standards, which can be illustrated by the following quote:

*“Try focusing on outward things, I feel like that H&M’s focus is just so internalized, focused what they are doing for themselves. I feel like what Patagonia is doing has a better impact on the society around them, and it’s not just to further their own profit.”*

Another thought that came up was that H&M maybe should consider changing their approach by trying to focus their communications on making fast fashion as green as possible rather than trying to be a fully green brand, which could be perceived as more credible.

### *Influence on Green Brand Equity*

According to the existing literature and research, green brand equity is positively influenced by green brand associations, whereas greenwashing has a negative impact on green brand associations (Akturan, 2018).

Using the findings of the focus group, we discover that consumers develop negative green brand associations towards brands that only dedicate one particular collection to sustainability like H&M does. This increases the consumer’s perception of greenwashing. Therefore, it can be argued that H&M’s Conscious Collection increases customers greenwashing perception which negatively influences the green brand associations and thus also has a negative indirect effect on the green brand equity of the respective brand (Akturan, 2018). In the case of Patagonia, consumers would also assume greenwashing if the brand would establish a product line that is especially eco-friendly. However, Patagonia is associated as a green and circular fashion brand among customers. Therefore, greenwashing perceptions are low, leading to positive green brand associations and indirectly to a higher green brand equity (Akturan, 2018).

With regards to a green brand image, scholars postulate that a green brand image positively impacts green brand equity (Chen, 2010; Ha, 2020). However,

greenwashing perceptions lead to a negative green brand image (Laufer, 2003) which in turn can have a negative influence for the green brand equity. Building on the focus group, H&M only having the Conscious Collection, consumers did not perceive H&M to have a green brand image. Hence it can be argued that it did not have an indirect positive but rather an indirect negative effect on the green brand equity. For Patagonia, consumers perceived it to have a green brand image, as it is dedicated to nature and the environment. Consequently, it can be stated that the green brand image of Patagonia positively effects their green brand equity.

With respect to brand credibility, Ng et al. (2014) find that a high brand credibility has a positive impact on a brand's green image. As previously stated, a positive green brand image positively influences green brand equity (Chen, 2010; Ha, 2020). This means that a credible brand will also have a positive effect on green brand equity (Akturan, 2018). According to the focus group, H&M is not perceived as a credible green brand as it mainly focuses on its cheap and fast fashion garments. Therefore, the resulting low credibility can be said to be harmful for H&M's green brand equity. In contrast, Patagonia is perceived to be highly credible through its transparency and self-generated environmental tax. In the consequence, the high brand credibility can be regarded as a green equity booster for Patagonia.

The structural model, illustrated in Figure 1, summarizes the findings in respect to the described theories and chains of reasoning.

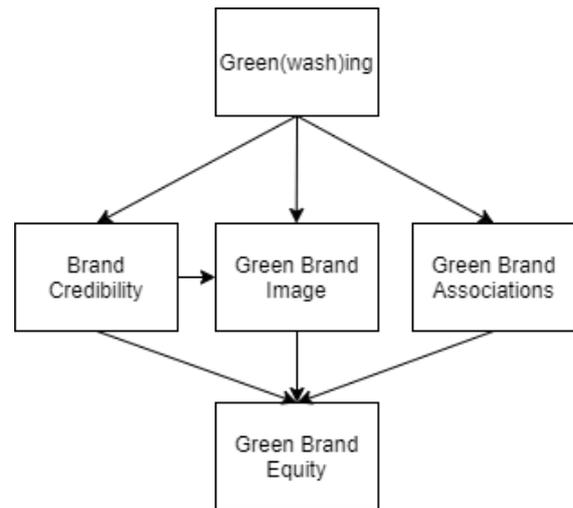


Figure 1: Structural model adapted from Akturan (2018).

Figure 2 and 3 in addition demonstrate in which way the different factors lead to a higher and lower brand equity for the analyzed fashion brands. Hereby, red arrows imply a negative impact and the green arrows a positive impact.

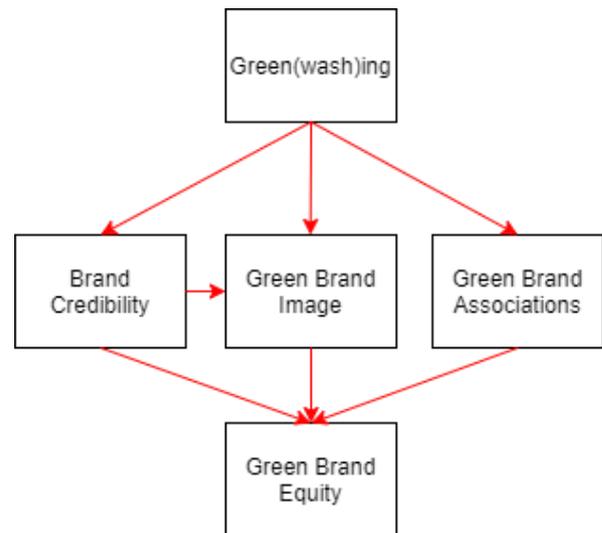


Figure 2: Structural model adapted from Akturan (2018) applied on H&M.

Applied on H&M, the perception of greenwashing lowers the credibility of the brand. This leads to a negative green brand image. Also, the greenwashing perception triggers a negative influence on H&M's green brand image and the green brand associations, which all together negatively impact the brand's green brand equity.

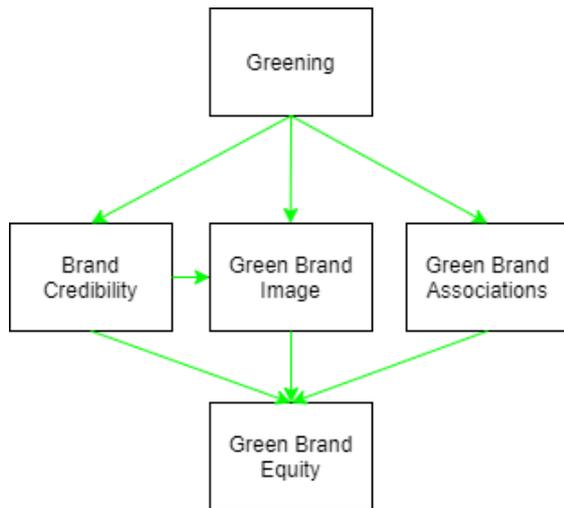


Figure 3: Structural model adapted from Akturan (2018) applied on Patagonia.

For Patagonia, however, no greenwashing perceptions were found when conducting the focus groups. Therefore, the model regards Patagonia only to be greening. This leads to a higher brand credibility which has a positive effect on the green brand image. Again, the greening leads to favorable green brand associations and to a favorable green brand image which all together positively impact the brand's green brand equity.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to further investigate and understand the influence of greenwashing on green brand associations, green brand image, brand credibility and finally green brand equity. Therefore, the paper builds up on Akturan's (2018) findings and partially replicates them by using the two fashion brands H&M and Patagonia.

Regarding the effect of greenwashing on consumers' green brand associations the paper shows that a brand that is perceived as greenwashing creates negative green brand associations among buyers. In the case of H&M participants perceived the brand as a greenwasher and also elicited negative green brand associations, e.g., fast-fashion and greenwashing. However, a brand that is fundamentally perceived as using greening but not greenwashing like Patagonia, develops positive brand

associations among consumers, such as conscious or circular fashion.

With respect to the influence of greenwashing on green brand image, the paper also finds that brands dedicating only one product line to sustainability, are perceived to greenwash, which leads to a negative effect on the green brand image. For example, H&M's Conscious Collection, as the only sustainable product line, could not result in generating a green brand image. Regarding Patagonia, all the garments were perceived to be sustainable, which positively influenced the green brand image. Starting to highlight products as particularly sustainable, would rather damage the green brand image than enhancing it, because of the perception of greenwashing.

The same result was discovered considering brand credibility. Brands that focus only partially on sustainability are perceived as less credible. In particular, transparency in dealing with sustainability is crucial and is of high value to consumers. H&M's Conscious Collection is insufficient in relation to their conventional collections and is thus found to be not credible. Patagonia, however, manages to be credible by making all products perceived as equally sustainable. In addition, the transparent handling of donations, e.g., Black Friday sales donations to grassroots organizations, further increases credibility for Patagonia.

Previous research shows that greenwashing has an impact on green brand associations (Akturan, 2018), green brand image (Chen, 2010; Ha, 2020; Laufer, 2003) and brand credibility (Ng et al., 2014), which in turn influences green brand equity (Akturan, 2018). Therefore, brands that perform poorly on these factors have lower green brand equity. Brands that perform well on these factors have a higher green brand equity. Consequently, H&M has a low green brand equity and Patagonia a higher green brand equity.

### *Theoretical and Managerial Implications*

This paper contributes to the field of green marketing and fashion brand literature by replicating previous findings and further developing the structural model by Akturan (2018).

From a managerial perspective, this paper suggests that when fashion brands attempt to create a greener brand and to develop green brand equity, managers need to consider the amount of sustainable collections. Only one collection dedicated to sustainability is harmful for a brand regarding green brand associations, green brand image, brand credibility and consequently green brand equity. Also, it decreases the value perception of the conventional collections. At the same time, fashion brands that are already perceived as green brands should not emphasize one product line to be especially environmentally friendly as this leads consumer to accuse the brand of greenwashing which then harms the brand's green brand equity.

Moreover, managers and the company should emphasize transparency. It is crucial to be honest in which stage a company is regarding their sustainability achievements. This implicates showing the next steps and admitting that becoming greener is an ongoing process rather than a rapid overnight transformation. For example, H&M could transparently explain its buyers why recycled cotton can only make up 20% of a product in the Conscious Collection (H&M, 2021b).

Next, companies should shift the focus of their greening strategy to an external focus, rather than relying on an internal focus and economic well-being. For H&M, this means that they should try to adapt their business model so that sustainability not only makes sense from a compliance perspective, but also becomes economically viable in the long term, as is the case with Patagonia. This leads to initializing a partial transformation from market orientation to brand orientation by extending their sustainable collections.

In addition, the communication strategy about becoming greener should be chosen wisely. Bridging the knowledge gap between what a company is doing and what the customers know about it, should not be only based on sustainability reports but rather be more tackled by social media communication. H&M could for example use Instagram more to highlight their efforts of becoming greener and sensitize the general buying behavior.

Coming back to the title, hence it is important to name bad guys and good guys in research papers. Firstly, this offers companies the opportunity to both recognize and accept their status. Secondly, theoretical implication would provide specific models and frameworks for bad guys to change their status, if wanted. Consequently, theories and studies help to raise awareness in public discourse. In the case of H&M, this offers the opportunity to come out as a bad boy and at the same time postulate that they are working on it and want to develop in the direction of a good guy. So even if it is unlikely for a bad guy like H&M to become an absolute good guy, companies like H&M could position themselves and try to make certain parts of their company more sustainable, by learning from good guys like Patagonia.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

Despite the study's theoretical and managerial contribution in the field of green marketing, there are certain limitations to it. First of all, this study only conducted one focus group due to time restrictions. Therefore, the responses and findings this study contains might be different when inviting different participants or conducting more focus groups. Morgan (1996) recommended to conduct up to six focus groups to have solid and generalizable findings. Although from a micro perspective, focus groups should be homogeneous, from a macro perspective up to six heterogeneous focus groups should be conducted to reflect a better cross-section of society including different socio-

demographic and educational backgrounds. Furthermore, only one English native participated the focus group. The other participants may therefore only have been able to express their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions to a limited extent.

Future research should take these limitations into account and replicate the findings with additional focus groups, fashion brands and even expand to other product categories. Our framework can serve as a good basis for this and can be further developed by considering other theories such as brand versus market orientation. Moreover, future scholars should extent and further develop the theoretical concepts we built up on in this paper as they are still very sparsely discussed in the marketing literature.

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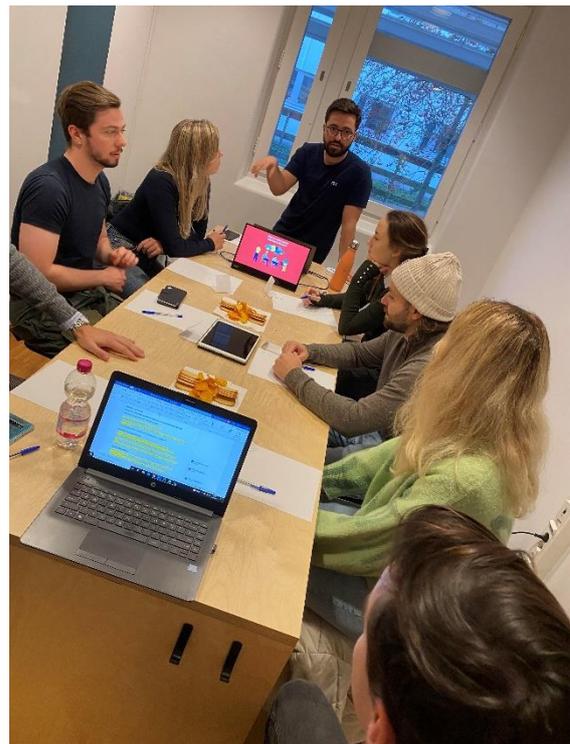
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## Appendices

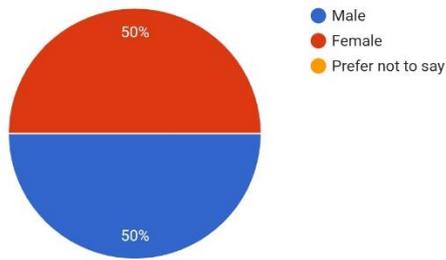
*Appendix 1: Pictures of the location and focus group*



*Appendix 2: Collection of socio-demographic information and consent to the use of the gathered personal data*

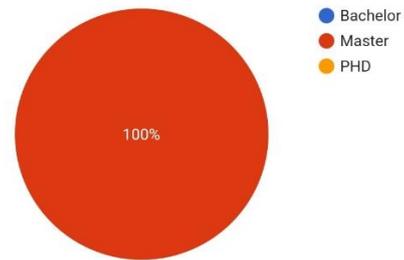
### Sex

6 Antworten



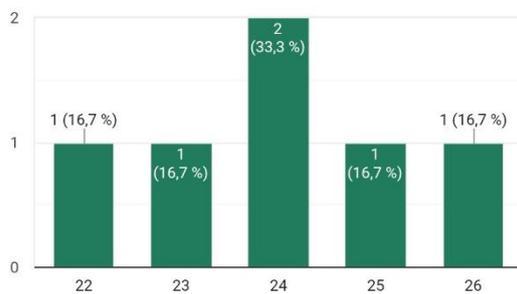
### What level of education are you pursuing?

6 Antworten



### Age

6 Antworten



### Do you agree on recording the focus group session and use your comments for research purposes?

6 Antworten



### Country of birth

6 Antworten

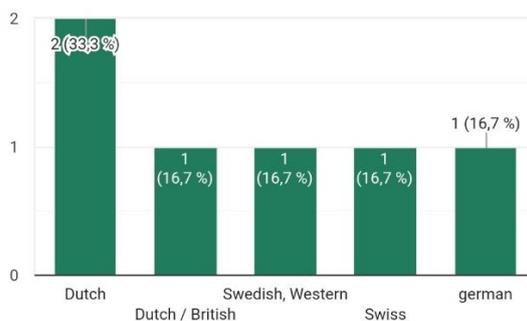
Netherlands
England
Sweden
Germany
Switzerland

### Appendix 3: Questions for focus group

- Describe the role sustainable plays in your purchase of cloth?
- Do you know the brands H&M and Patagonia? Can you describe your purchase experience with H&M and Patagonia?
- What do you associate with H&M? (What are six words you connect with H&M?)
- What do you associate with Patagonia? (What are six words you connect with Patagonia?)
- Have you heard of H&M Conscious Collection? If yes, what is it about? If no, what could it stand for?
- What about Patagonia? Do they also have a sustainable product line? If no, should they create one?

### Which cultures are you representing?

6 Antworten



7. What is your impression of H&M's effort to be a more sustainable fashion brand? Do you believe H&M is a green brand?

8. What do you think about green hangtags? Do you perceive the brand more credible?

9. What is your impression of Patagonia's effort to be a more sustainable fashion brand? Do you believe Patagonia is a green brand?

10. What is your overall impression of Patagonia donating all its Black Friday sales to environmental projects?

11. What do you think helps brands to be credible in their green communication?

12. Do you think H&M's launch of its Conscious Collection has changed H&M's image? Why yes? Why no?

13. What do you think about having a conscious product line and a conventional product line? Does it help to make a brand create a green image?

14. After this discussion, do you feel like the brands are green(wash)ing their products?