

The fashion industry boosts its use of sustainable materials, but greenwashing remains

Article

The trend: Fashion brands are using more sustainable materials than ever before, per a report by Textile Exchange. But a crackdown on greenwashing could force companies to

make more substantive changes to avoid punitive action and keep consumers happy.

A closer look: Half of all fibers used by fashion brands in 2020 were “preferred materials,” which have a more sustainable environmental and social impact than standard fibers, [per](#) Textile Exchange. But the majority of preferred materials that brands use either come from non-textile waste (like plastic bottles) or are resource-intensive to cultivate (like cotton and wool).

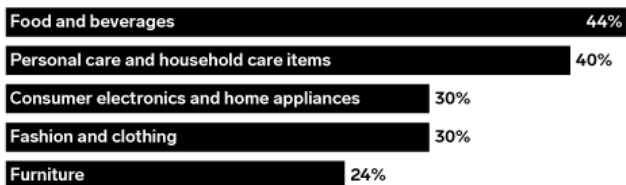
- Retailers like **H&M** and **adidas** have made much of their use of materials like recycled polyester, which in 2020 accounted for roughly one-third of all polyester used.
- But these recycling initiatives don’t do much to lessen fashion’s environmental footprint: In 2020, **only 6.5% of recycled fibers were sourced from textile waste.**

Greenwashing persists: Fashion brands are better at marketing environmental initiatives than implementing them. For example, the recasting of plastic leather as “vegan leather” has enabled some retailers to present their wares as environmentally friendly—despite the fact that the material is made from fossil fuels.

Many retailers rely on the Higg Index, a highly influential ratings system that measures materials’ sustainability. But critics say the index [contributes to greenwashing](#) by representing synthetic materials as more sustainable than natural fibers.

Increase in Spending for Brands that Engage in Sustainable Practices According to Internet Users Worldwide, by Product Category, Sep 2021

% of respondents



Note: in the last 12 months

Source: Capgemini, “Circular Economy for a Sustainable Future,” Nov 8, 2021

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Governments crack down: Governments are [beginning to investigate](#) and push back against deceptive labeling. That could force retailers and manufacturers to implement real change or, at the very least, make consumers more aware of greenwashing.

- The Norwegian Consumer Authority said the use of Higg data to back up brands' sustainability claims is "misleading" and a violation of greenwashing laws. The finding has consequences beyond Norway given the Higg Index's wide use, and could stymie retailers' attempts to capitalize on consumers' affinity for environmentally friendly brands.
- That's led the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, a trade group including **Walmart**, H&M, **Patagonia**, **Gap**, and other retailers, to pause its transparency program and commission a review of the data behind the Higg Index.

Attitudes Toward the Responsibilities of Government and Big Business on Environmental Impact According to UK Adults, Aug & Nov 2021
 % of respondents



Note: ages 18+
 Source: Marks and Spencer, "The M&S Family Matters Index, February 2022" conducted by Yonder, Feb 23, 2022
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The big takeaway: Consumers are getting savvier about sussing out misleading sustainability claims. Even some retailers are taking aim at fast-fashion giants over their environmental practices, which apart from functioning as a marketing campaign shows how shoppers are increasingly framing their purchases as a form of activism.

- Online resale platform **thredUP** asked shoppers in the Bay Area to boycott a **Shein** shopping event, calling out the fast-fashion company for "encouraging endless consumption" and creating waste.
- But cost concerns related to inflation could cause shoppers to prioritize price over sustainability, and potentially disincentivize fashion brands from making meaningful changes to their business practices.