

Business Ethics: Fast Fashion & Sustainability

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Introduction

Ethical dilemmas arising in the business world are difficult to address, being that ethics are a rather vague term: what is right versus what is wrong. Therefore, holding ethics to the comparison of what is right and wrong by law is a very different question. Ethical dilemmas in the workplace are common, especially in a profit-driven world. The fashion industry has faced an exponential rise in ethical issues as transparency becomes a primary consumer decision making factor, and there are little jurisdictions made over the cases of sustainability in the marketplace. As sustainability becomes more important to the consumer and the survival of our planet, companies are pivoting their marketing techniques to better suite the changing consumer climate. However, how far can the term “sustainable” reach when used in marketing? These questions are being posed to some of the biggest fast fashion companies, like H&M and Bohoo.

Ethics in the Fashion Industry

The large fast fashion players like H&M and Bohoo have recently been warned: The Competition and Market Authority announced that they are opening an investigation upon greenwashing in the fashion industry. Greenwashing is when companies outwardly market sustainability practices, but in reality, the companies are non-sustainable for a multitude of alternate reasons. This investigation has been opened by authorities in the United Kingdom in an attempt to curb the extreme overuse, pollution, and waste in the fashion industry.

Brands like H&M and Bohoo are under fire due to their recent campaigns that have been coined as “sustainable”. Terms like “green”, “sustainable”, or “eco-friendly” have the ability to mislead consumers into believing that they are making an environmentally friendly choice, when in reality, the company is simply utilizing a marketing technique that attracts consumers.

This issue has been brought to light by consumers, industry professionals, and climate specialists. Many consumers questioned H&M when they began their sustainability campaign due to the sheer size and profit level that H&M operates in. There are very high stakes at the core of this dilemma; if H&M is found guilty of greenwashing, fines, shutdowns, and negative word of mouth are very probable.

The Competition and Markets Authority stated that they have ““not reached a view as to whether there have been any breaches of consumer protection law”” in their investigation thus far (Bloomberg, 2022). It is still unsure when the CMA will announce their overall findings.

The fashion industry is bare of litigation in terms of sustainability, and while being spoken about and emphasized, no huge movements have been made by the government nor companies to guarantee that these new products or services will better protect the environment or consumers. I believe that these companies should face consequences, the application of consequentialism, due to the blurriness of fashion company’s commitments to sustainability. This misleads the consumer, therefore decreasing the overall common good of society. Additionally, until climate commitments are made, tagging products “sustainable” will continue to do nothing for the common good if conditions are not changed. In conclusion, I believe that the fashion industry needs to be held more accountable and litigation needs to be passed to monitor their marketing practices that may mislead consumers.

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