

## Higher Project Qualification

**Do accusations of greenwashing in the fast fashion industry affect consumerism?**

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# Do accusations of greenwashing in the fast fashion industry affect consumerism?

## **1. Introduction**

### 1.1 fast fashion and background research

I choose this question because I believe there is not enough action taken against companies who greenwash and there is not enough information in the media on greenwashing. The fast fashion industry which is defined as clothes that are manufactured and sold at a low cost so customers can buy clothes frequently,<sup>1</sup> is accountable for 10% of global emissions.<sup>2</sup> This industry is constantly critiqued for its unsustainability and as people become more eco friendly and ethical consumerism is on the rise, brands are becoming more conscious of keeping up with consumers' green needs. This has resulted in the rate of greenwashing escalating in the new millennium, it has been found that 42% of all claims of a brands sustainability have been exaggerated, untrue or deceptive.<sup>3</sup> This is because consumer want for sustainable products has increased significantly. Greenwashing is defined as the activities a company undertakes to convince their customers that the organisation is

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge Dictionary. "FAST FASHION | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary." *Cambridge.org*, 22 Jan. 2020, [dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fast-fashion](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fast-fashion).

<sup>2</sup> Sundbottom, Karoline. BI Norwegian Business School -Campus Oslo GRA 19703. 1 July 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Ioannou, Ioannis, et al. "How Greenwashing Affects the Bottom Line." *Harvard Business Review*, 21 July 2022, [hbr.org/2022/07/how-greenwashing-affects-the-bottom-line](https://hbr.org/2022/07/how-greenwashing-affects-the-bottom-line). Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

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concerned about the environment, however in reality the business is greatly harming the environment.<sup>4</sup> Many businesses see this influx in environmental awareness as a business opportunity, a way to create an edge to their product and attract customers. This is an important topic as many consumers are unaware of the extent of greenwashing allowing them to be deceived by companies, negatively impacting the environment. This is because misleading language makes consumers believe they are helping the environment, however this results in a loss of progress to a more sustainable society.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Greenwash Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com." *Oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com*, 2022, [www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/greenwash#:~:text=\(also%20greenwashing\)](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/greenwash#:~:text=(also%20greenwashing)).

<sup>5</sup> Mooney, Lauren. "What Is Greenwashing and Why Is It Bad for Sustainability? | Verive." Verive.eu, 2021, [verive.eu/en/articles/what-is-greenwashing-en](https://verive.eu/en/articles/what-is-greenwashing-en). Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

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### **Discussion**

#### **2.1 Factors influencing consumer perception**

The effect of greenwashing on consumers is influenced by original consumer perceptions of a company and consideration of sustainability. To accurately measure greenwashings influence on consumers, each of these factors must be explored further.

One factor that affects consumer's is the original perception of the company. Consumers are loyal to brands because they are used to the brands products and services, customers are also loyal to the brand because they are accustomed to there service and believe in their quality<sup>6</sup> From this we can conclude if a consumer ascertains the information that a brand is greenwashing, they are more likely to boycott a brand they have never bought from, other than a brand they are loyal to. This leads to many experiment's making up company names to avoid assumptions about the case.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Customer Loyalty vs Brand Loyalty: Differences and Why It Matters." *ReSci*, 25 Sept. 2012, [www.retentionscience.com/blog/customer-loyalty-vs-brand-loyalty/#:~:text=Consumers%20are%20loyal%20to%20a](http://www.retentionscience.com/blog/customer-loyalty-vs-brand-loyalty/#:~:text=Consumers%20are%20loyal%20to%20a). Accessed 5 Dec. 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Forsell, Filip, and Ida Åkerblom. How Do Consumers' Perceptions Change When Greenwashing Is Revealed? Effect of Information on Consumer Perceptions and Purchase Intention in the Context of Greenwashing.

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Another factor that influences the effect of greenwashing on customers is their consideration of sustainability. People with low levels of environmental concerns are less likely to contribute to environmental activities,<sup>8</sup> and would not be affected by greenwashing accusations. Green purchase intention, defined as the possibility that a consumer buys an environmentally friendly product over buying a product that is bad for the environment.<sup>9</sup> This also has a big impact, because as the green purchase intention rises more people would be affected by greenwashing. Contrastingly, green consumers when provided with something suggesting a brand's sustainability they are more likely to evaluate brands more negatively; as brands are often viewed as selfish.<sup>10</sup> This is because brands are created in order to achieve maximum profits.

### **2.1 Legality around greenwashing**

One reason why greenwashing has become an increasing problem is because of the lack of legality around it. There isn't any greenwashing legalisation in the United Kingdom.<sup>11</sup>

However the CMA which has the power to impose fines<sup>12</sup> states that greenwashing can be

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<sup>8</sup> Sharma, Kavita, and Chandni Aswal. "Green Purchase Intentions, Collectivism and Materialism: An Empirical Investigation." *Research Gate*, Jan. 2017, [www.researchgate.net/publication/328276803\\_Green\\_Purchase\\_Intentions\\_Collectivism\\_and\\_Materialism\\_An\\_Empirical\\_Investigation](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/328276803_Green_Purchase_Intentions_Collectivism_and_Materialism_An_Empirical_Investigation). Accessed 6 Dec. 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Puspitasari, Nia Budi, et al. The Effect of Green Purchase Intention Factors on the Environmental Friendly Detergent Product. [www.e3s-conferences.org/articles/e3sconf/pdf/2018/48/e3sconf\\_icenis18\\_06007.pdf](http://www.e3s-conferences.org/articles/e3sconf/pdf/2018/48/e3sconf_icenis18_06007.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Sundbottom, Karoline. BI Norwegian Business School -Campus Oslo GRA 19703. 1 July 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Unsworth, Matthew. "Sustainability or Spin? Greenwashing and the Law." *Legal Cheek*, 19 Mar. 2021, [www.legalcheek.com/lc-journal-posts/sustainability-or-spin-greenwashing-and-the-law/](http://www.legalcheek.com/lc-journal-posts/sustainability-or-spin-greenwashing-and-the-law/). Accessed 24 Nov. 2022.

<sup>12</sup> "CMA Imposes Record Fines for Breaches of Initial Enforcement Order in Merger Cases." *Www.ashurst.com*, [www.ashurst.com/en/news-and-insights/legal-updates/competition-law-newsletter-](http://www.ashurst.com/en/news-and-insights/legal-updates/competition-law-newsletter-)

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considered a criminal offence under the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008.<sup>13</sup> Contrastingly Greenwashing is a very difficult and complicated crime to punish. It is easy to spot the outright lies regarding a company's sustainability, however other greenwashing tactics are a lot more inconspicuous and are hard to take action against. For Instance many brands use images of the environment or green colours, which have connotations of environmentally friendly actions, therefore trying to appear more green conscious.<sup>14</sup> Consumers may be able to spot this and avoid such companies however CMA would not be able to take action against these brands.

### **2.3 Customer purchase intentions and wanted self image**

Greenwashing has been repeatedly shown as a factor that does not affect a consumer's purchase intention. For example in a survey on sustainability, only 14% of people said that they would never buy from a company again after finding out that a company has greenwashed a product (see below), other percentages stated various thing like a consumer would not change their purchase decision or, they would try to buy from the brand as little as possible. However only a small minority of consumers would boycott the shop altogether.<sup>15</sup>

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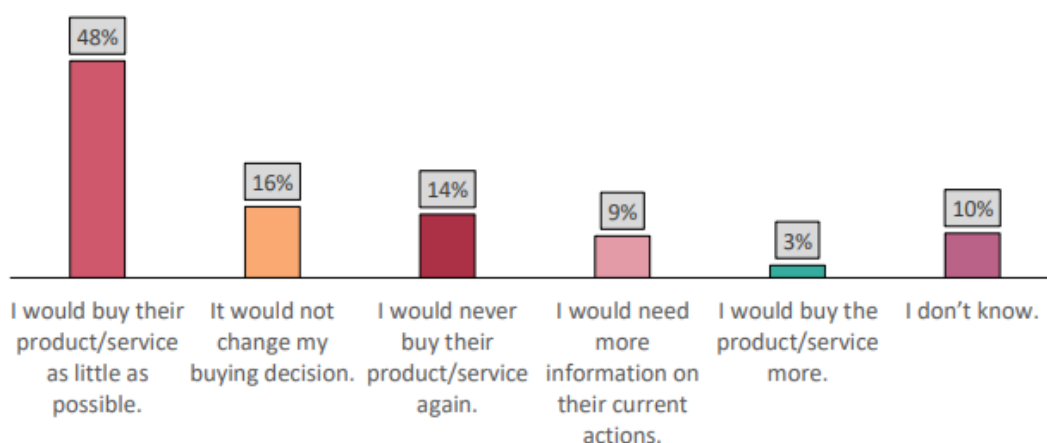
march-2022/cn06---cma-imposes-record-fines-for-breaches-of-initial-enforcement-order-in-merger-cases/. Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Ayvazyan, Amy. "CMA to Issue Consumer Protection Penalties of up to 10% of Global Turnover – Greenwashing Becomes More Costly." BCL Solicitors LLP, 29 Apr. 2022, [www.bcl.com/cma-to-issue-consumer-protection-penalties-of-up-to-10-of-global-turnover-greenwashing-becomes-more-costly/](http://www.bcl.com/cma-to-issue-consumer-protection-penalties-of-up-to-10-of-global-turnover-greenwashing-becomes-more-costly/). Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Forsell, Filip, and Ida Åkerblom. How Do Consumers' Perceptions Change When Greenwashing Is Revealed? Effect of Information on Consumer Perceptions and Purchase Intention in the Context of Greenwashing.

<sup>15</sup> Lauchlan, Elsie, and Will Roberts Roberts. Green Lies: Exploring Consumer Perceptions of Greenwashing. July 2020. Accessed 28 Nov. 2022.

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It is thought that greenwashing has more of an impact on perceptions of a company than purchase behaviour.<sup>17</sup> Consumers may recognise unsustainable practices, however they do not boycott the company, especially if they are loyal to the brand, consumers seem to react with words instead of actions. Illustrating the gap between the thoughts and words of consumers than actual behaviours.<sup>18</sup> This is shown through the figure below which shows that 40% of people would not recommend the brand to family and friends even if they liked the product and service, and 14% would recommend the brand to family and friends. This contrasts with the figure above where only a small minority would boycott a brand completely. Illustrating the gap between consumers' words instead of actions.

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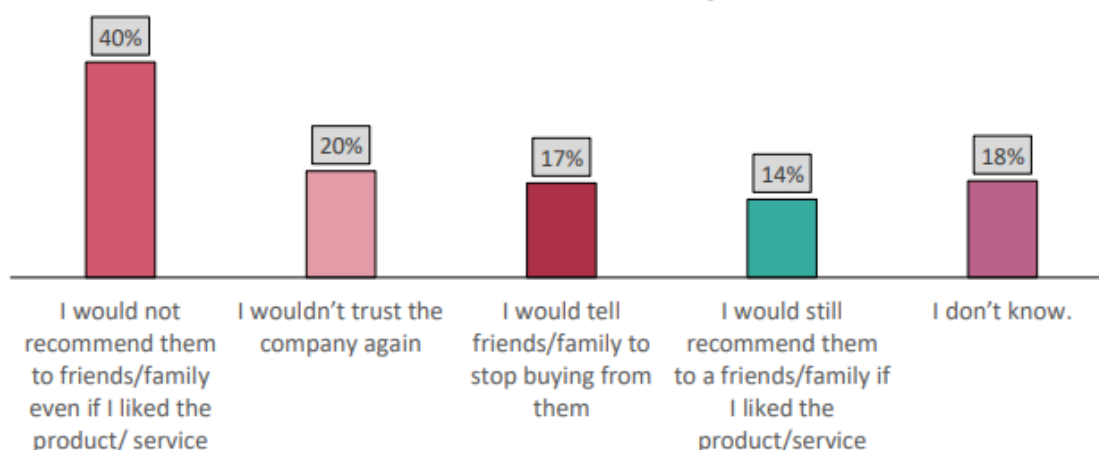
<sup>16</sup> Abid

<sup>17</sup> Lauchlan, Elsie, and Will Roberts Roberts. Green Lies: Exploring Consumer Perceptions of Greenwashing. July 2020. Accessed 28 Nov. 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Abid



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Another reason why greenwashing doesn't affect consumer perception; is that many consumers continually say they will not support companies that contribute negatively to the environment and that greenwash, however they still support large corporations who practise this.<sup>20</sup> Illustrating that wanted self image is more important than true sustainable practices. Conveying that consumers are not concerned with the greenwashing of a company, they just care about how they are perceived and that they are perceived as being environmentally friendly, instead of actually being environmentally friendly.

Greenwashing does negatively impact companies in many ways. Perception of greenwashing has a negative effect on green purchase intention.<sup>21</sup> Which is defined as the inclination of a customer, who is invested in the climate and conscious issues, to choose a

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<sup>19</sup> Abid

<sup>20</sup> Sundbottom, Karoline. BI Norwegian Business School -Campus Oslo GRA 19703. 1 July 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Lu, Xiaoqian, et al. "How Does Young Consumers' Greenwashing Perception Impact Their Green Purchase Intention in the Fast Fashion Industry? An Analysis from the Perspective of Perceived Risk Theory." *Sustainability*, vol. 14, no. 20, 19 Oct. 2022, p. 13473, 10.3390/su142013473.

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more sustainable product instead of a typical product.<sup>22</sup> This leads to a lower willingness to purchase an environmentally friendly product, after finding out that a company has greenwashed.<sup>23</sup> Negatively impacting the company's profits.

Adding to this, greenwashing accusation do affect consumers' purchasing habits. When consumers are acquainted with the inconsistency between brand performance and advertisements. Consumers generally act differently towards a company because of a lack of understanding about the company's motives; when companies greenwash consumers are reluctant to build trust and brand loyalty and equity reduces in the eyes of the customer.<sup>24</sup> Also customer trust can only be built up through open communication and commitment to sustainability every time,<sup>25</sup> leading to greenwashing being detrimental to a company's ability to build brand loyalty which is fundamental to a company's success. Inferring that the insincere actions of a company do impact the consumers who purchase there.

### **2.4 Consumers care towards greenwashing**

Greenwashing is often considered as a factor that affects consumer views of a company, however research suggests otherwise. When asked whether they would buy from

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<sup>22</sup> Puspitasari, Nia Budi, et al. The Effect of Green Purchase Intention Factors on the Environmental Friendly Detergent Product. [www.e3s-conferences.org/articles/e3sconf/pdf/2018/48/e3sconf\\_icens18\\_06007.pdf](http://www.e3s-conferences.org/articles/e3sconf/pdf/2018/48/e3sconf_icens18_06007.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Lu, Xiaoqian, et al. "How Does Young Consumers' Greenwashing Perception Impact Their Green Purchase Intention in the Fast Fashion Industry? An Analysis from the Perspective of Perceived Risk Theory." *Sustainability*, vol. 14, no. 20, 19 Oct. 2022, p. 13473, 10.3390/su142013473.

<sup>24</sup> Abid

<sup>25</sup> Niinimäki, Kirsi. "Ethical Foundations in Sustainable Fashion." *Textiles and Clothing Sustainability*, vol. 1, no. 1, 17 June 2015, [link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40689-015-0002-1](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40689-015-0002-1), 10.1186/s40689-015-0002-1.

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companies they know have greenwashed; only 5% were indifferent about the answer<sup>26</sup> showing that the vast majority of people whether they are affected by greenwashing in a negative or positive way are still influenced by the information that a company has been greenwashing.

### **2.5 Consumer consideration towards the environment**

Sustainability is often not considered as the primary factor or an incentive for someone to purchase an item.<sup>27</sup> Frequently the sustainability aspect is considered to be a positive addition rather than the main incentive to purchase, where cost exceeds the greenness of a product.<sup>28</sup> So when consumers discover the greenwashing practices of a corporation they will not evaluate the brand negatively because sustainability is never at the forefront of their mind while shopping for items.

On the other hand when companies are found out for using greenwashing tactics, it is frequently considered as something that only consumers who value sustainability highly in their mind care about. However greenwashing causes the equivalent amount of negative reactions, from green consumers and non green consumers.<sup>29</sup> This is because no matter

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<sup>26</sup> Alvoittu, Anni. The Effects of Greenwashing on Consumer Behaviour. 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Abid

<sup>28</sup> Abid

<sup>29</sup> Blesserholt, Josephine. The “Sins” of Greenwashing a Content Analysis of Greenwashing’s Role in the Fast Fashion Industry. 2021.

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how you value sustainability when consumers find out about greenwashing accusations, it is hard to place trust in a brand for example in quality and on conscious issues.

### **2.6 Why do companies greenwash and consequences of this**

In a survey on sustainability 80% answered that sustainability affects purchase decisions.<sup>30</sup>

This gives many companies the incentive to greenwash because instead of creating truly sustainable clothes it is much easier to lie or exaggerate what a cooperation does to help the globe, especially as studies show environmental concern have a positive effect on consumer perception on companies and their purchase intention.<sup>31</sup> However greenwashing is not effective for companies in the long run;<sup>32</sup> this is because the CMA which can impose fines on companies will take action<sup>33</sup> to protect consumers under Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations<sup>34</sup> This has a negative effect on consumers because of the reliability of the CMA and the bad publicity it causes a company changing the view of the brand in the customer's eyes.

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<sup>30</sup> Alvoittu, Anni. The Effects of Greenwashing on Consumer Behaviour. 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Brouwer, Anne. REVEALING GREENWASHING: A CONSUMERS' PERSPECTIVE. 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Abid

<sup>33</sup> "CMA Imposes Record Fines for Breaches of Initial Enforcement Order in Merger Cases." [www.ashurst.com](http://www.ashurst.com), [www.ashurst.com/en/news-and-insights/legal-updates/competition-law-newsletter-march-2022/cn06---cma-imposes-record-fines-for-breaches-of-initial-enforcement-order-in-merger-cases/](http://www.ashurst.com/en/news-and-insights/legal-updates/competition-law-newsletter-march-2022/cn06---cma-imposes-record-fines-for-breaches-of-initial-enforcement-order-in-merger-cases/). Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Ayvazyan, Amy. "CMA to Issue Consumer Protection Penalties of up to 10% of Global Turnover – Greenwashing Becomes More Costly." BCL Solicitors LLP, 29 Apr. 2022, [www.bcl.com/cma-to-issue-consumer-protection-penalties-of-up-to-10-of-global-turnover-greenwashing-becomes-more-costly/](http://www.bcl.com/cma-to-issue-consumer-protection-penalties-of-up-to-10-of-global-turnover-greenwashing-becomes-more-costly/). Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

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In H&M they created a clothing line claiming that it was a conscious collection which was made "with a little extra consideration for the planet," and each product "contains at least 50 percent more sustainable materials, such as organic cotton or recycled polyester, but many contain a lot more than that" these claims were found untrue<sup>35</sup> H&M however as a brand did not address this causing an uproar against them and negatively affecting the company's brand equity. This is another reason why greenwashing does have an impact on consumer perception.

## **Conclusion**

### **3.1 summary and the successfulness of the project**

In conclusion, overall, greenwashing accusations do not have impacts on consumers. There are many opposing arguments for this: When given information about a brand's sustainability, green consumers often have an unfavourable opinion of it, however this is a weak argument because sustainability is not considered as a primary incentive for a consumer's purchase of a product leading to a lack of concern when companies are found to greenwash. Another opposing argument is that people will always react negatively to greenwashing accusations because their trust with the brand is now gone and even if they do not have consideration for the environment they will still find it hard to trust brand on things such as quality of clothes. However this is a weak argument because consumers trust

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<sup>35</sup> Marino, G. (2022). *(Un)sustainable fashion: H&M is being sued for greenwashing*. [online] [www.renewablematter.eu](https://www.renewablematter.eu/articles/article/unsustainable-fashion-h-and-m-is-being-sued-for-greenwashing). Available at: <https://www.renewablematter.eu/articles/article/unsustainable-fashion-h-and-m-is-being-sued-for-greenwashing>.

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in brands and their brand loyalty makes them less likely to boycott a brand when it is discovered they green wash even if they don't trust them anymore. Another opposing argument is that many green consumers evaluate brands negatively when given information on their sustainability. This is because of green consumers' general scepticism about a brand as they are unsustainable in nature making them more likely to boycott a greenwashing company. However this is a weak argument because even if consumers consider themselves to be green, 'wanted self image' is more prevalent so consumers care more about appearing as though they care about the environment than actually caring about the environment, meaning that even if green consumers voice their scepticism about a brand they will still buy from them. Another opposing argument is that: In a survey on sustainability 80% answered that sustainability affects purchase decisions.<sup>36</sup> This shows that when consumers are deciding whether to purchase from a true green brand or an untrue green brand they are more likely to purchase from a true green brand. Showing that greenwashing does actually affect purchase intention. However this is a weak argument because even though consumers care about sustainability it is not the most important factor (generally cost.) So if the untrue green brand has cheaper items than the true green brand it is most likely they will pick the cheaper items.

This project was successful, as I came to an overall conclusion and I covered everything I set out to research. For example: the relationship between consumers and sustainability, legality around greenwashing, brand loyalty, why brands greenwash e.t.c. Some of my main difficulties were that I underestimated how long it would take for me to properly research

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<sup>36</sup> Alvoittu, Anni. The Effects of Greenwashing on Consumer Behaviour. 2022.

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the entirety of my project. Another one of my main difficulties was my question. I needed to change it twice to make it more precise and to meet the needs of the things I research by rewording my question. More action needs to be taken by the government on the legality around greenwashing and preventing false advertisement from reaching the consumers. This is a relevant suggestion because as greenwashing becomes more and more common there needs to be more legal action taken against it to prevent this increase. More research needs to be done on whether consumers are aware of greenwashing and the publicity around brands who green wash, this is relevant because as the amount of greenwashing increases consumers need to be aware of how brands will take advantage of them. I hope my project will influence future decisions, when people next research greenwashing they should focus more on the publicity of greenwashing and the legality. I also hope that the government will start to take more action and there will be more information on greenwashing in the media.

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