

Navigating greenwashing: the communication strategies of H&M Group and Inditex

Anna Carolina Boechat, Laura Minelli and Ricardo Morais

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the main communication strategies adopted by Inditex and H&M Group to address accusations of greenwashing, focusing on how they communicate around corporate responsibility, sustainability and transparency.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopts a case study design with purposive sampling of H&M Group and Inditex. Data comprise publicly available corporate communication materials (annual reports, sustainability reports and corporate websites) published between 2019 and 2023, analyzed through content and comparative analysis.

Findings – The results show that both companies' strategies revolve around three pillars: transparency, responsibility and circularity. Reports provide more detailed technical information, while websites emphasize consumer awareness and stakeholder engagement. However, neither company applies a clear and comparable measurement framework for sustainability performance, and Inditex in particular was found to lack sufficient transparency.

Research limitations/implications – This study focuses exclusively on publicly available corporate materials, excluding other communication channels such as social media or press releases.

Practical implications – The findings offer insights for global fashion brands into how communication strategies can strengthen credibility in sustainability narratives and help mitigate reputational risks associated with greenwashing.

Social implications – By highlighting the importance of transparency and accountability, this study underscores the role of communication in shaping consumer trust and advancing sustainable practices in the fashion industry, particularly in Asian production contexts.

Originality/value – This study provides a communication-focused comparison of how leading fast-fashion companies address greenwashing through formal corporate disclosures. It conceptualizes sustainability communication as legitimacy management and identifies recurring strategic patterns – transparency, responsibility and circularity – while exposing limitations in measurement and comparability that affect the credibility of sustainability claims.

Keywords Greenwashing, Sustainability, Corporate social responsibility, Communication strategy, H&M Group, Inditex

Paper type Research paper

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1. Introduction

Sustainability is now vital for organizations to remain competitive and should be integrated into corporate strategy (Talal, 2022). Increased global awareness of human environmental impact highlights the need for sustainable practices. Sustainable businesses seek to minimize adverse environmental and societal effects while achieving long-term profitability, balancing social progress, economic growth and environmental care (Greenstone, 2023).

The interdependence of environmental, social and economic systems has been emphasized by academics (Meadows *et al.*, 1972). Businesses that adopt sustainability

measures can positively impact the environment while benefiting from these initiatives (Cici and D'Isanto, 2017). Integrating sustainability into corporate strategy creates value and a competitive advantage and addresses stakeholders' demands regarding environmental and social issues (Murthy, 2012). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) refers to a corporation's duty to its stakeholders in terms of social and sustainable accountability. CSR has transitioned from a modest commitment to a strategic necessity, balancing value creation and economic success with a responsible and proactive approach toward stakeholders (Kotler and Lee, 2005). Companies are encouraged to incorporate environmental, social and governance considerations into their research as public demand for "green" or socially conscious investments increases (United Nations, 2023).

Recently, a phenomenon has garnered the attention of academics and practitioners: greenwashing. This practice involves companies intentionally misleading the public about their environmental actions, creating a false impression of being more environmentally conscious than they are (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). The rise in greenwashing is attributed to increased awareness of environmental concerns among stakeholders (Parguel *et al.*, 2011). The fashion industry, for example, faces ethical, social and environmental challenges, and it is known that integrating sustainability into core business strategies enhances competitive advantage, brand reputation and overall business success (Peters and Simaens, 2020). However, the fashion industry is one of the most accused of greenwashing.

This study is conceptually based on the intersection of Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), which necessitates corporate communication to manage expectations and legitimacy (Murthy, 2012), and the literature on organizational legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), where companies use communication to bridge the gap between their actions and societal values, particularly concerning sustainability. The prevalence of greenwashing highlights a failure in this legitimation process. While the literature has extensively documented the existence and impacts of greenwashing, there is a critical research gap in understanding the specific, structured corporate communication strategies major industry players use in response to greenwashing accusations. The fast-fashion giants, H&M Group and Inditex, occupy a unique and pivotal position. Their business model inherently struggles with core sustainability principles, making their efforts to communicate progress and manage reputational risk particularly complex and scrutinized. Existing research often focuses on consumer-facing marketing rather than the official, high-stakes disclosures found in annual and sustainability reports. A detailed comparative analysis of the communication in these official documents is crucial, as their strategies shape global perceptions and influence the future direction of sustainable fashion, especially given their deep reliance on Asian supply chains and expanding consumer markets in Asia.

Furthermore, since both Inditex and H&M Group rely heavily on Asian manufacturing networks, their sustainability communication directly influences practices and perceptions in these regions. The way these corporations present sustainability in their reports and digital platforms affects not only their global reputation but also the adoption of sustainable standards among Asian suppliers and local stakeholders (Vural, 2018; ILO, 2017). Examining how sustainability is framed in relation to their Asian operations (particularly regarding working conditions, environmental impact and supply chain transparency) provides a clearer understanding of how corporate communication contributes to shaping sustainability practices within the Asian fast-fashion ecosystem (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; World Bank, 2019).

Moreover, the present study is necessary to analyze the evolution of corporate communication from mere reporting to a sophisticated strategic response aimed at maintaining legitimacy amidst environmental criticism. The specific objectives of this research are: (O1) to identify the challenges and opportunities associated with sustainable corporate practices within the fast-fashion sector; (O2) to investigate the relationship

between corporate communication and greenwashing by identifying how official statements are strategically crafted to manage organizational legitimacy. Based on this framework, the research aims to understand the main communication strategies used by the two biggest fast-fashion companies in the world, H&M Group and Inditex, to address the greenwashing phenomenon. This leads to the primary research question (*RQ1*): What are companies' main communication strategies to address greenwashing accusations?

To achieve this, the study uses an exploratory approach using content and comparative analysis of annual reports, official statements, corporate website announcements and sustainability reports published between 2019 and 2023. By focusing on these two dominant players, who heavily influence global supply chains and consumer perception, this research seeks to systematically dissect their communication strategies to identify the principal tactics used to legitimize their sustainability efforts, manage intense stakeholder scrutiny and mitigate the persistent reputational threat posed by greenwashing accusations, thereby providing critical insights into the future of corporate responsibility communication in the fast-fashion sector.

2. Literature review

To provide a structured understanding of the research problem, this literature review is organized around three key thematic areas: corporate communication strategies and sustainability, greenwashing practices and their implications and greenwashing in the fashion industry. These themes were selected to establish a cumulative analytical progression, moving from the theoretical foundations of corporate communication and organizational legitimacy, to the conceptualization of greenwashing as a strategic communicative response and finally to its concrete manifestation within the fast-fashion sector, which constitutes the empirical focus of this study.

2.1 Corporate communication strategies and sustainability

At a macrolevel, the role of corporate communication can be effectively analyzed through the lens of Organizational Legitimacy Theory (Meyer and Tse, 2025). This theory posits that organizations actively strive to align their practices and policies with the social norms and values of their stakeholders to be perceived as legitimate and acceptable within the broader societal framework (Suchman, 1995). In this context, corporate communication emerges as a critical strategic tool that facilitates the management of this relationship, serving to bridge potential gaps between a company's operational realities and societal expectations. This alignment is essential not only for fostering trust and credibility among stakeholders but also for ensuring continued access to vital resources such as capital, talent and customer loyalty. Effective corporate communication involves crafting messages that resonate with the values of various stakeholder groups, thereby reinforcing the organization's commitment to social responsibility and ethical practices. As a result, communication strategies must be thoughtfully designed to convey transparency, accountability and responsiveness to societal concerns. Ultimately, the practice of effective communication is foundational to maintaining organizational legitimacy, which is crucial for long-term survival and success in a rapidly changing business environment.

The goal of corporate communication is to foster a positive image and reputation among different stakeholders, such as the public, employees and investors (Yolcu and Ozan, 2022). It involves managing internal and external information and addressing organizational challenges to maintain a favorable reputation (Frandsen and Johansen, 2014). Corporate Communication is a strategic analytical process that not only facilitates continuous improvement but also guides decision-making (Apolo *et al.*, 2017). For Goodman (2006), it is as a strategic management function that encloses public relations, corporate branding and communication with several stakeholders.

In such a crowded landscape as the media, organizations must use integrated corporate communication strategies to capture attention and convey consistent messaging, which helps establish a robust corporate image (Kitchen and De Pelsmacker, 2004; Schultz *et al.*, 1993). Consolidating communication efforts into centralized departments can enhance productivity and reduce costs (Cornelissen, 2020). This function also plays a vital role in linking strategic management with business strategy and maintaining connections with external stakeholders (Grunig and Repper, 1992; Cornelissen, 2020). Effective communication can ensure organizational success, more particularly during transitional times, as it can boost public perception and reassure employees (Argenti, 2017). In addition, outlining marketing activities in a communication plan is very important for successful strategy implementation (Steyn, 2004). Evaluating both the internal and external environments helps shape the communication strategy, focusing on key stakeholders (Steyn, 2004).

The pressing need to integrate sustainability into business operations has elevated the role of communication from a traditional Public Relations function to an essential strategic pillar within organizations. Grounded in Stakeholder Theory, corporate success increasingly depends on the ability to effectively balance the diverse interests of all relevant stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, suppliers and the broader community (Freeman, 1984; Zervoudi *et al.*, 2025). In this framework, communication transcends the mere cultivation of public image; it involves the systematic dissemination of verifiable evidence demonstrating a genuine commitment to environmental stewardship, social responsibility and robust governance practices (ESG). This evidence is crucial for satisfying the rigorous demands of powerful institutional stakeholders, such as investors who prioritize sustainable practices and regulators who enforce compliance with environmental standards. By doing so, companies not only enhance their credibility but also maintain corporate legitimacy, which is vital in today's competitive landscape where transparency and accountability are paramount (Murthy, 2012; Zervoudi *et al.*, 2025).

For Peters and Simaens (2020), it is crucial to integrate sustainability principles into core business strategies to improve a brand's reputation and gain competitive advantages. This must be achieved through the inclusion of consumer awareness and top management's commitment to sustainability. Murthy (2012) shares the same view and notes that incorporating sustainability creates value and meets stakeholder demands. On the other hand, Suriyankietkaew and Petison (2020) argue that sustainability-oriented strategies lead to competitive advantages and sustainable growth. The ESG framework (environment, social and governance) is essential for organizations aiming to incorporate sustainability into their strategy, allowing them to measure performance in these critical areas (Talal, 2022).

In the fashion industry, this integration is particularly relevant given that global supply chains are largely concentrated in Asian countries, where sustainability challenges – such as labor conditions, resource use and environmental impact – are most pressing (Li *et al.*, 2025). Thus, corporate communication strategies addressing sustainability cannot be dissociated from the Asian context, where both production practices and consumer markets are increasingly central to the future of the industry (Vural, 2018).

Contemporary CSR has evolved from philanthropic and compliance-oriented practices to a strategic, governance-infused approach that links social and environmental performance with long-term value creation (Zervoudi *et al.*, 2025). Early work emphasized balancing economic and societal goals, culminating in the triple bottom line paradigm (Elkington, 1998). Subsequent contributions positioned CSR as a strategic necessity embedded in corporate decision-making and stakeholder relationships (Kotler and Lee, 2005; Cornelissen, 2020; Grunig and Repper, 1992). In parallel, reporting systems matured through widely adopted frameworks [e.g. global reporting initiative (GRI)] and alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, enabling greater comparability and external

scrutiny of nonfinancial performance (Global Reporting Initiative, 2021; United Nations, 2023).

Recent studies underline both opportunities and persistent gaps. Evidence shows that credible sustainability signals can enhance brand performance and stakeholder trust, yet inconsistent or opaque disclosures undermine legitimacy and fuel accusations of greenwashing (Cowan and Guzman, 2020; Parguel *et al.*, 2011; Li *et al.*, 2025). Sector-level assessments further document methodological and integrity challenges in corporate net-zero targets and supply-chain transparency, especially salient in fashion (Day *et al.*, 2023; Day *et al.*, 2024; Fashion Revolution, 2024; European Commission, 2024). Taken together, this trajectory suggests that CSR has shifted from symbolic communication to a form of sustainability governance, where robust metrics, third-party verification and transparent supply-chain disclosure are prerequisites for credible reporting in complex global networks (Zervoudi *et al.*, 2025).

2.2 Green strategies and greenwashing

The term “greenwashing” comes from “environmental whitewash”, implying corporate dishonesty (Karliner, 1997). It is known as a deceptive marketing practice where companies falsely advertise their policies or products as environmentally friendly to boost their image (Kahle and Gurel-Atay, 2015; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). There is no consensus among academics on a precise definition of greenwashing, as it often relies on subjective interpretation of claims (Oswald, 2011; Torres *et al.*, 2023). Lyon and Montgomery (2015) add that greenwashing can vary from mild exaggeration to outright falsehoods about a company’s eco-friendliness.

Bowen and Aragon-Correa (2014) noted that existing literature on greenwashing is limited by assumptions about its nature and impact. Delmas and Burbano (2011) categorized companies based on their environmental performance and communication styles, identifying “greenwashing firms” as those misleadingly promoting poor environmental practices. Netto *et al.* (2020) described two primary actions of greenwashing: concealing harmful information while spreading positive messages. Greenwashing can manifest through product labels, PR campaigns and advertising, influencing consumer decisions significantly (Nielsen, 2014; Li *et al.*, 2025). The two types identified by Netto *et al.* (2020) are “claim greenwashing,” which involves fabricating environmental benefits, and “execution greenwashing,” which uses appealing imagery to suggest environmental friendliness. Greenwashing is characterized by the intent to mislead the public about environmental actions (Lam and Grønås, 2022), and consumers are growing wary of these deceptive practices. Greenwashing is prevalent, with claims like “environmentally friendly” becoming increasingly ambiguous (Hsu, 2011). Over time, consumers have grown to spot greenwashing, which has resulted in reduced sales and credibility for companies that engage in it (Kahraman and Kazançoğlu, 2019; Mamo, 2025). To effectively combat greenwashing, organizations should enhance transparency by providing accurate information about their sustainability efforts and engage with stakeholders to better understand their expectations (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015).

From a theoretical perspective, greenwashing represents a strategic breakdown in organizational legitimacy theory, where companies attempt to symbolically demonstrate adherence to social norms (ecological responsibility) without undertaking substantive change (Bowen and Aragon-Correa, 2014; Park *et al.*, 2023). This disparity between action and communication is precisely what damages organizational trust and invites regulatory scrutiny (Netto *et al.*, 2020; Zervoudi *et al.*, 2025). The intent to mislead stakeholders, whether through “claim greenwashing” or “execution greenwashing,” fundamentally undermines the communicative integrity required for maintaining legitimacy.

Combating greenwashing, therefore, requires more than just marketing correction, it requires a profound commitment to radical transparency (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). For organizations operating in environments of heightened scrutiny, this means shifting from vague, aspirational messaging to delivering clear, measurable and quantifiable disclosures that are rigorously validated by independent third-party auditors (Torres *et al.*, 2023). Such a transformation not only involves redefining communication practices but also ensuring that the data provided is both accurate and comparable across industry standards (Torres *et al.*, 2023). By prioritizing transparency and accountability, organizations can effectively address skepticism from both consumers and watchdog groups, thereby regaining and maintaining their external legitimacy. This strategic emphasis on detailed reporting, not just on environmental impact but also on social and governance factors, plays a crucial role in building stakeholder trust. In an era marked by increasing environmental awareness and demand for ethical business practices, implementing a robust framework for transparent communication is essential for fostering credibility and cultivating lasting relationships with consumers, investors and the wider community.

2.3 Greenwashing in the fashion industry

Fashion encompasses various segments like clothing, cosmetics, jewelry and footwear, boasting a global gross domestic product of \$2.4tn and supporting around 300 million jobs (Macchion *et al.*, 2015; Adamkiewicz *et al.*, 2022). However, this financial success often conceals serious environmental issues linked to resource extraction and pollution throughout its life cycle (Niinimäki *et al.*, 2020; Papamichael *et al.*, 2022). The industry is notorious for unethical labor practices, environmental harm and consumer ignorance (Barber, 2021; Rahman and Yadlapalli, 2021).

Despite some companies like Nisolo striving for sustainable practices as Climate Neutral Certified B Corporations, the fashion industry remains a significant polluter, accounting for 2%–8% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and 20% of global wastewater (UN alliance for sustainable fashion, 2021; Nisolo, 2024). Only 3% of B Corps in the USA are fashion companies, making sustainable practices a challenge in a broader industry of over 27,000 brands (B Lab U.S. and Canada, 2023). While the demand for sustainability is rising, many brands focus more on reducing negative impacts rather than enacting transformative changes (Global Fashion Summit, 2024).

Textiles produce more GHG emissions than international air travel and shipping (Wu and Li, 2020), and Europe generates approximately 12.6 million tonnes of textile waste annually (European Commission, 2023). Many brands further exacerbate this issue by promoting low-quality items that fuel a throwaway culture, doubling clothing production since 2000 (Dottle and Gu, 2022). The EU's Sustainable and Circular Textiles strategy aims to address these concerns through regulations like REACH (Regulation on Registration, Evaluation, Authorization and Restriction of Chemicals), which requires transparency on hazardous chemicals (Directorate General for Environment, 2022). Yet, greenwashing – claiming sustainability without genuine efforts – persists as brands seek to exploit eco-conscious trends (Alizadeh *et al.*, 2024). Misleading marketing can confuse consumers and undermine trust in authentic sustainable practices (Furlow, 2010). Greenwashing often manifests through ambiguous terminology and unsustainable practices masked as eco-friendly initiatives. As consumers struggle to identify genuine sustainable products, many hesitate to pay a premium for them (Khan *et al.*, 2020). A comprehensive approach is needed to combat these misleading practices, ensuring transparency and true efforts in sustainability within the fashion industry (Adamkiewicz *et al.*, 2022).

The fast-fashion business model, distinguished by its reliance on planned obsolescence, swift product turnover and an extensive dependence on low-cost, high-volume production methods, fundamentally contradicts the principles of authentic sustainability. This inherent clash creates a pronounced legitimacy deficit that even the most sophisticated and

optimistic messaging strategies are unlikely to fully rectify. Major players in the industry, such as H&M and Inditex, are thus involved in a complex and often contradictory communication endeavor: they must simultaneously advocate for their lucrative high-volume sales, which are inherently unsustainable, while also promoting their purported commitment to circular economy practices and efforts to minimize environmental impacts (Dottle and Gu, 2022). This deep-seated tension forms the core of the persistent allegations of greenwashing that plague the fast-fashion sector, as the public increasingly questions the genuineness of these companies' sustainability claims in light of their operational practices.

These sustainability challenges are particularly acute in Asia, where the majority of global textile and garment production takes place. Countries such as Bangladesh, China, India and Vietnam supply most of the fast fashion consumed worldwide, often under conditions of environmental strain and labor vulnerability (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; ILO, 2017; World Bank, 2019). As a result, accusations of greenwashing in the fashion industry cannot be dissociated from the Asian context, where production impacts are most concentrated and where transparency in supply chains is urgently needed.

Given this structural conflict and the acute pressure stemming from the Asian manufacturing supply chains, the communication strategies of fast-fashion giants are not merely promotional tools; they are defensive mechanisms designed to manage and reduce the legitimacy gap. This research focuses specifically on the official corporate reports, as these documents represent the highest level of formalized corporate accountability and are crucial for influencing sophisticated stakeholders like investors and regulators. Analyzing these reports provides an essential empirical basis for understanding how H&M Group and Inditex strategically frame their sustainability efforts to address greenwashing accusations.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a comparative case study design (Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018; Mishra and Rasundram, 2017) focused on the fast-fashion sector, given its substantial environmental impact and persistent greenwashing allegations (Papamichael *et al.*, 2022; UN alliance for sustainable fashion, 2021; Adamkiewicz *et al.*, 2022). The case study approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth, contextualized examination of real-world communication practices within their broader organizational and regulatory context, making it well suited to address how major corporations strategically frame sustainability. This approach has been successfully used in analogous organizational research, including the study of family business education across multiple Asian contexts (Edujje and Chicuala, 2025) and performance management in public-sector organizations (Elufisan and Elufisan, 2022). Within this case study framework, purposive sampling was applied to select the two case organizations: H&M Group and Inditex were deliberately chosen due to their dominant market positions, shared reliance on Asian production networks and well-documented histories of greenwashing accusations, enabling a theoretically grounded and practically relevant comparison. The data analysis tools used are content analysis and comparative analysis, used to systematically examine corporate communication materials and identify recurring strategic patterns. The core objectives are (O1) to identify the challenges and opportunities associated with sustainable corporate practices within the fashion sector and (O2) to investigate the relationship between corporate communication and greenwashing. This methodology addresses the primary research question: What are the main communication strategies used by companies to respond to accusations of greenwashing? (RQ1).

3.1 Research design and data collection

This section details the methodological foundation of the study, covering the sampling strategy and data corpus which used purposive sampling of H&M Group and Inditex's

highest-level corporate reports from 2019 to 2023. It addresses the critical issue of addressing interpretation and verifiability by clarifying that the analysis treats these self-disclosing documents as the primary evidence of communication strategy, rather than verifiable facts. The section further outlines the systematic data analysis procedure, comprising a two-step process of data extraction (thematic coding) and subsequent comparative analysis. Finally, it introduces the groups under study: H&M Group and Inditex, providing the rationale for their selection based on their market dominance and history of greenwashing allegations.

3.1.1 Sampling strategy and data corpus. In this investigation purposive sampling was used to select relevant brands and ensure access to comprehensive data (Elo *et al.*, 2014; Perry, 1998). For this study, H&M Group and Inditex have been deliberately chosen due to their significant market presence, shared reliance on Asian production networks, which invites increased scrutiny of their supply chains, and their well-documented history of greenwashing allegations. This selection creates a focused case study that allows for an in-depth examination of strategic communication practices in challenging circumstances. This approach aligns with established case study methodology (Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018) and is consistent with recent exemplars of purposive case selection in organizational research (Edujlee and Chicuala, 2025; Elufisan and Elufisan, 2022).

The data corpus will consist exclusively of publicly available, high-stakes corporate documents published between 2019 and 2023. This includes Annual Reports, Sustainability Reports (which may combine annual and sustainability data), Official Corporate website Announcements from dedicated sustainability sections, and Official Policy Statements (e.g. new sustainability commitments). These sources were selected because they exemplify formalized corporate accountability and are geared toward discerning stakeholders such as investors, regulators and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The claims made in these documents must withstand a greater level of scrutiny than typical marketing materials, making them particularly relevant for this analysis.

The temporal scope of this study (2019–2023) was deliberately chosen to capture a critical and turbulent period in corporate sustainability communication. The starting point, 2019, coincides with the launch of the European Green Deal and Inditex's publication of its New Sustainability Commitments, marking a decisive escalation in sustainability reporting ambitions. The 2020–2021 period encompasses the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted global supply chains and heightened scrutiny of fast-fashion's social and environmental impacts. The years 2022–2023 saw mounting regulatory and civil society pressure, including the EU's Green Claims Directive proposal (European Commission, 2023) and multiple high-profile greenwashing investigations targeting both H&M and Inditex. Studying this five-year window thus enables longitudinal tracking of how communication strategies evolved in response to increasing external pressure, rather than capturing a static snapshot. It is acknowledged, however, that this period may not be fully representative of longer-term trends, and that communication strategies may continue to develop beyond the timeframe studied. Regarding generalizability, the purposive selection of only two firms, both large, publicly listed and European, limits the external validity of findings. Results may not be directly transferable to smaller brands, non-European companies or emerging-market fast-fashion producers. This selection bias is an inherent feature of the case study design, which prioritizes depth over breadth, and is consistent with the exploratory nature of the research.

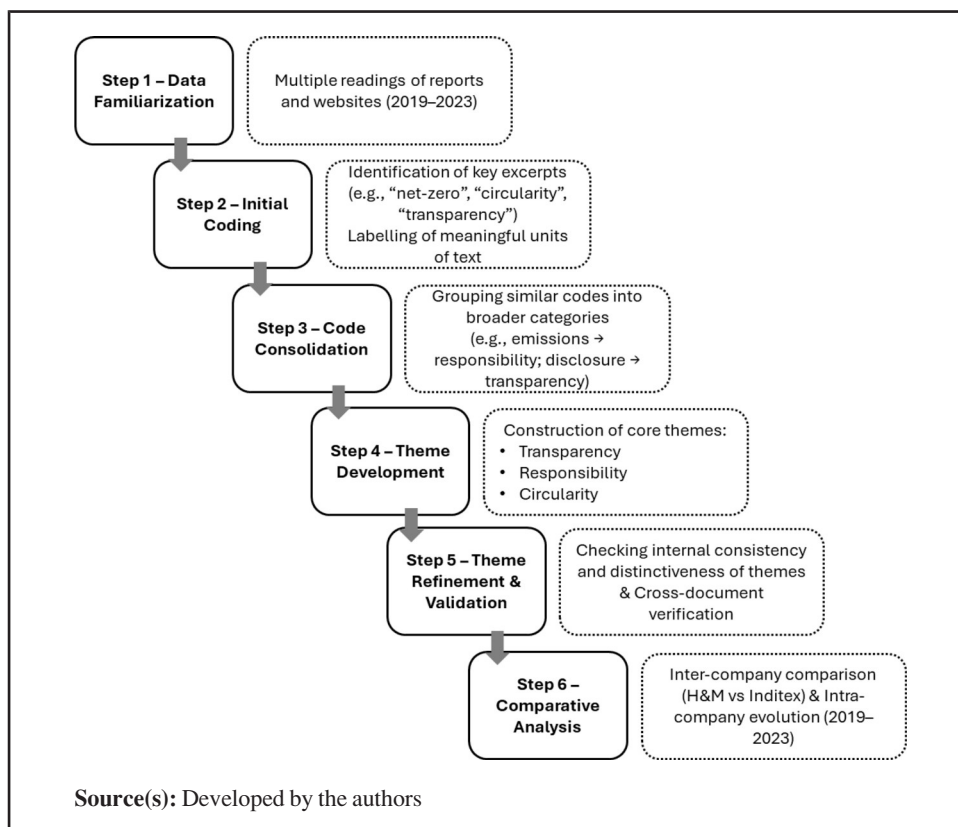
3.1.2 Addressing interpretation and verifiability. While corporate reports are inherently self-disclosing documents that reflect management's perspective and selective presentation of data, our methodology does not treat the claims as independently verifiable facts. Instead, we consider the reports themselves as the primary evidence through which the communication strategies are evaluated. Our focus shifts away from simply verifying whether H&M has met its net-zero emissions goal. Instead, we analyze the manner in which

they communicate this objective, scrutinizing the specific language used to frame their progress and the particular metrics they choose to disclose. This nuanced approach is consistent with the study of organizational legitimacy, wherein the communication artifact, namely, the report, becomes the central object of analysis, providing insights into how the organization seeks to position itself in relation to its stakeholders and the wider public on sustainability issues. By doing so, we aim to uncover the underlying narratives and strategic messaging that inform H&M's sustainability discourse.

3.2 Data analysis procedure

The analysis was conducted in a comprehensive two-step process. The first step involved content analysis and thematic coding, using a rigorous thematic approach to systematically identify, analyze and report patterns within the textual data obtained from the reports and websites of H&M Group and Inditex over a five-year period from 2019 to 2023. Initially, a thorough familiarization with the reports was undertaken, involving multiple readings to grasp the nuances of the sustainability discourse. Following this, initial coding commenced, wherein key phrases, sentences and paragraphs explicitly relating to sustainability goals, concerns regarding greenwashing, performance metrics and supply chain management were labeled. To enhance transparency and replicability, Figure 1 illustrates the step-by-step process of thematic coding applied in this study. The total analytical corpus comprised 22 documents: for H&M Group, five Annual and Sustainability Reports (2019–2023) and one corporate website sustainability section, analyzed across five subpages; for Inditex, seven official sustainability and environment documents ([New Sustainability Commitments, 2019](#), [Sustainability of our Products, 2020](#), [Sustainability, the Basis for Transformation, 2021](#),

Figure 1 Thematic coding procedure



[Environment, 2022](#), [Environment, 2023](#) and the Biodiversity Strategy), supplemented by one Sustainability Policy document and one corporate website sustainability section. All documents were publicly available and retrieved directly from the official corporate websites of each organization. The combination of formal annual and sustainability reports with corporate website content was intentional: reports represent the highest level of formalized disclosure aimed at institutional stakeholders (investors, regulators, NGOs), while websites target a broader public audience and often emphasize simplified, engagement-oriented narratives. Analyzing both channels enables a more comprehensive assessment of each company's communication strategy and any inconsistencies across platforms.

The thematic coding process followed a structured and iterative logic, moving from initial coding to progressive abstraction and theme development. Rather than merely describing the data, the analysis involved inductively generating codes and consolidating them into higher-order categories that captured recurring communication patterns. The final themes – transparency, responsibility and circularity – emerged through constant comparison across documents and companies, ensuring analytical coherence and robustness.

This coding identified terms such as “net-zero commitment,” “supplier audit,” “circularity goal,” “transparency initiative” and “Higg Index.” Subsequently, the initial codes were grouped into broader themes that reflected recurring communication strategies. This process culminated in the identification of three primary, nonoverlapping communication pillars: Transparency, Responsibility and Circularity. These themes provided a foundation for the subsequent comparative analysis. Each theme was refined to ensure clarity and internal consistency. For the purposes of this study, each construct was operationalized as follows. “Responsibility” was defined as corporate commitments to measurable GHG reduction and supply chain accountability; it was coded when documents included quantified emission targets, supply chain audit mechanisms, supplier engagement programs or references to science-based targets. “Transparency” refers to the proactive and verifiable disclosure of sustainability performance data; it was coded through references to third-party verification, public supplier lists, standardized reporting metrics (e.g. GRI Standards, Higg Index) and explicit acknowledgement of data limitations or gaps. “Circularity” denotes strategies aimed at transitioning from linear to closed-loop production models; it was coded when documents mentioned take-back programs, recycled or bio-based material usage, circular design commitments, product lifespan extension or repair and resale initiatives. These operational definitions guided the systematic coding of all documents in the corpus and ensured that each theme was applied consistently across both companies and all five years of the study period.

The second step of the analysis comprised a detailed comparative assessment between H&M Group and Inditex regarding how they framed and implemented each of the three communication pillars, Circularity, Responsibility and Transparency, over the five-year span. This structured comparison enabled the identification of strategic differences in how each company managed the legitimacy of their sustainability claims. The comparative analysis involved a twofold examination: first, an intercompany comparison that evaluated how each organization used the identified themes. For instance, Inditex's emphasis on human rights and initiatives like Zara Pre-Owned was contrasted with H&M's focus on innovation and collaborative efforts, such as the Fashion Climate Fund. Second, an intracompany comparison tracked the evolution of communication strategies within each organization from 2019 to 2023. Notably, H&M's transition from promoting a “Circular Fashion Industry” to a more specific emphasis on net-zero emissions marked a significant shift, alongside their decision to move away from the vague term “climate-positive.” This systematic approach not only grounded the interpretations in textual evidence derived from company disclosures but also helped mitigate subjective biases by necessitating verification of identified communication strategies across documents and companies.

Following this rigorous analysis, the data collected from H&M Group and Inditex's official reports and websites will be detailed in the upcoming section, Data Presentation, which elucidates the thematic findings and specific initiatives identified through the content analysis, forming the empirical foundation for addressing the research question (RQ1).

3.3 Groups under study: H&M Group and Inditex

H&M Group is a multinational fashion corporation with over 4,000 stores in 75 countries and online sales in 60 markets. The company emphasizes sustainable fashion and design, stating: "All our brands and business ventures share the same passion for making great and more sustainable fashion available to everyone." However, H&M has faced criticism for alleged greenwashing, particularly regarding its "Conscious Choice" collection and the transparency of its sustainability claims.

Inditex, or Industria de Diseño Textil, is a Spanish multinational textile company operating over 5,800 stores worldwide under brands like Zara and Massimo Dutti. The company aims to offer affordable, stylish clothing. In the past, Inditex has been accused of greenwashing on several occasions, especially concerning the unclear sustainability claims of its eco-friendly collection "Join Life" and its supply chain transparency. Similar to H&M's practices, Zara's use of terms like "organic cotton" and "recycled wool" has drawn scrutiny for vagueness.

Both companies rely heavily on Asian production networks, particularly in Bangladesh, China, India and Vietnam, where issues of labor conditions, resource use and environmental impact make their sustainability claims especially significant and subject to scrutiny (ILO, 2017; World Bank, 2019). Also, both groups' sustainability documents frequently refer to their Asian sourcing and production networks, which were therefore considered a critical element of the analysis to capture the communication of sustainability within Asian contexts.

4. Data analysis and results

4.1. H&M Group official website

The H&M Group's website provides a detailed overview of its sustainability efforts, defining sustainability as processes that minimize environmental impact compared to traditional options. The group's strategy is evaluated through various data sources, including life cycle assessments and supply chain scores. H&M supports a circular economy vision by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, focusing on longer product lifespans and safe, renewable materials. Key themes on their site are categorized as follows:

- "Leading the Change": Emphasizing innovation, transparency and collaboration.
- "Circularity and Climate": Aiming for net-zero emissions by 2040 and a positive impact on biodiversity.
- "Fair & Equal": Promoting social equity and diversity throughout the value chain.

The company's climate goals listed in the documents, include its reduction of GHG emissions by 56% by 2030 and its achievement of net-zero by 2040, with a commitment to keeping global temperature rise to 1.5°C. H&M acknowledges that complete emission reduction is not feasible but highlights interconnected impacts on water resources and biodiversity. To achieve their goals, they focus on measuring emissions, investing in renewable energy and collaborating on climate initiatives. H&M's Green Fashion Initiative aims to fund projects that can significantly cut emissions. They reduced suppliers relying on coal boilers and signed agreements for renewable electricity.

H&M partners with organizations to support carbon removal technologies and sustainable practices. The company advocates for climate-friendly policies and creates funds to

decarbonize the fashion industry, such as the Fashion Climate Fund. H&M tracks the impact of their green investments by measuring emissions reductions rather than financial returns. Finally, they have opted to phase out the term “climate-positive” due to its ambiguous meaning. The website includes links to in-depth sustainability reports, engaging content and visual data representations to enhance user understanding of their sustainability metrics and initiatives.

4.2. H&M Group documents and reports

The Annual Sustainability Reports, available in the “Reports and Presentation” section of the brand’s website, are archived and sorted by year and consist of six chapters with subchapters highlighting past progress and future insights. Although titles remained largely the same over five years, minor updates were made. These reports detail H&M Group’s financial and nonfinancial performance, enhanced by a sustainability section on their corporate website. External frameworks, like the Global Reporting Initiative and the UN Guiding Principles, further enrich understanding of the company’s sustainability topics.

H&M Group published its first combined Annual and Sustainability Report in 2021, integrating sustainability throughout its operations. Between 2019 and 2023, the reports evolved in content and layout. The earlier reports (2019–2020) maintained a consistent structure, starting with an introduction and sections on Vision & Strategy and “Leading the Change.” A significant focus was on Circular & Climate Positive practices, followed by Fair & Equal initiatives and Supply Chain Management insights. Under Leyla Ertur’s leadership, the 2021 and 2022 reports introduced new focuses, such as “Performance Highlights” that summarized yearly sustainability achievements. This structure included sections on “Circularity, Climate and Nature,” along with fairness and responsible supply chain management.

In 2023, the report further refined the structure, emphasizing H&M Group’s sustainability impact, governance, resource management and social responsibility. Over the years, the focus shifted from promoting a circular fashion industry in 2019 to addressing net-zero emissions and sustainable resource use by 2023. Key themes included innovation, transparency and governance to achieve these goals. The reports illustrate H&M’s transparency efforts, collaborating with the Sustainable Apparel Coalition’s Higg Index to share environmental performance scores, considering various environmental impacts. H&M also provides insights into partnerships and progress on sustainability targets while detailing ongoing and upcoming initiatives. The reports combine text, infographics, images and links to case studies, showcasing the group’s dedication to sustainability.

4.3 Inditex official website

Inditex’s Sustainability website includes seven sections: “Overview,” “Our Path,” “Beginning the Cycle,” “Production,” “Our Delivery,” “Beyond” and “Reporting.” They have set clear targets, including sourcing 100% of linen and polyester from preferred sources by 2025, reducing water consumption in their supply chain by 25% and reaching three million people with their Workers in the Centre strategy. By 2030, they aim to protect and improve biodiversity across 5 million hectares, cut emissions by over 50% and use environmentally favorable textile raw materials. They commit to achieving zero net emissions by 2040, with a 90% reduction in carbon footprint compared to 2018. Inditex emphasizes transforming the industry through clean energy, circularity and sustainability.

Their Sustainability Innovation Hub works with startups to promote innovative materials and processes, such as investing in CIRC for industrial recycling of polyester and cotton blends. By 2030, 100% of their textile products will use lower-impact materials, with specific sourcing goals for new fibers and recycling methods.

The company also focuses on responsible management and prioritizes human and labor rights through its Workers at the Centre strategy. To help reduce water usage, Inditex has programs for optimizing water use in processing facilities and is involved in the Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals pledge. The group also launched “Zara Pre-Owned” in 2022, promoting a circular economy and options for clothing repairs and donations. The website presents sustainability efforts clearly, emphasizing innovation, efficiency and collaboration, with a commitment to transparent communication about their progress.

The design of the website is modern, with a user-friendly navigation menu that allows visitors to access key sustainability topics easily. It includes distinct sections on environmental initiatives, circular economy practices, supply chain management and social impact, all presented in clear, concise language to appeal to a broad audience. Inditex shares official reports on their commitments and sustainability standards, reinforcing their dedication to a responsible fashion industry.

4.4 Inditex Group documents and reports

Our analysis takes on several reports from Inditex, including “[New Sustainability Commitments, 2019](#)” and “[Environment, 2023](#).” According to the documents, in 2019, Inditex focused on circularity and sustainable product design, introducing the “Join Life” program, which aimed for 50% of garments to meet sustainability standards by 2022. Since then, the group has shifted to a new Fibres Plan for lower-impact fibers and established a Sustainability Committee to oversee these efforts.

In 2020, Inditex launched the “Safe to Wear” and “Clear to Wear” standards, achieving a 90% increase in recycled materials since 2019. In addition, their Biodiversity Strategy focused on forest ecosystem conservation, alongside a commitment to human rights and anti-discrimination in the supply chain. By 2021, Inditex updated their Sustainability Policy to align with core business values and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The focus on transparency and climate-related disclosures aimed at developing a robust decarbonization strategy.

In 2022, the group’s comprehensive approach to sustainability included goals for clean energy, achieving 91% renewable energy consumption and significantly reducing GHG emissions. They also updated their sustainability standards and launched another program, this time, to address social issues in the supply chain. Inditex’s commitment from 2019 to 2023 has clearly evolved from building foundational efforts to making innovative strategies, through the integration of sustainability into their business model and an emphasis on human rights, ethical practices and transparency.

In summary, while Inditex and H&M share themes of circularity and transparency, Inditex’s focus is on detailed reporting, human rights, CSR initiatives and comprehensive environmental strategies.

5. Discussion

The assessment of the communication strategies used by H&M Group and Inditex in relation to sustainability and greenwashing is guided by a clear framework for thematic insights derived from comprehensive content analysis. This includes evaluating both companies’ reporting terminology, communication transparency and strategic focus across defined themes: responsibility, transparency and circularity. This discussion moves beyond a descriptive summary to critically interpret how these themes were operationalized and why they frequently failed to mitigate skepticism, as evidenced by external evaluations. The theoretical lens of organizational legitimacy theory suggests these companies are attempting to align their symbolic actions (communication) with societal expectations (sustainability), while also reflecting impression management dynamics under conditions of reputational pressure. However, the data reveal a persistent gap between rhetoric and verifiable substance.

5.1 Communication strategies: thematic analysis

Before presenting the thematic analysis, a longitudinal overview of how the three communication pillars evolved over the five-year period is instructive. For H&M Group, the 2019–2020 reports were primarily structured around the “Circular Fashion Industry” framing, with circularity dominating the sustainability narrative. From 2021 onwards, under new sustainability leadership, the emphasis shifted markedly toward climate governance and net-zero commitments, with responsibility-related language intensifying and a more self-critical tone emerging, particularly in the 2022 report following the Higg Index controversy. By 2023, all three themes were present but with a more integrated framing that sought to connect circularity, climate responsibility and transparency into a single sustainability governance narrative. For Inditex, the 2019 commitment documents focused primarily on product-level circularity (the Join Life program) and supplier accountability. From 2021, transparency-related language increased, coinciding with updates to the Sustainability Policy and alignment with the UN SDGs. However, transparency remained more procedural than substantive across all years, as discussed further below. The 2022–2023 documents showed a greater emphasis on environmental targets and clean energy, with circularity maintained through the launch of Zara Pre-Owned in 2022. This temporal evolution suggests that both companies adapted their communication strategies in response to external pressures, regulatory, civil society and reputational, rather than following a predetermined sustainability roadmap, raising questions about the strategic as opposed to genuinely transformative nature of their communications.

Both H&M Group and Inditex adhere to a commitment to using scientifically robust and widely recognized terminology in their sustainability communications. Their reports frequently use language like “reduce,” “measure” and “disclose” in relation to emissions targets (as shown in Table 1), creating an impression of accountability.

While their communications incorporate educational content aimed at informing stakeholders about goals and the rationale behind their sustainability initiatives, a deeper

Table 1 Terminology used in reports by Inditex and H&M Group

<i>Terminology findings</i>	<i>Inditex</i>	<i>H&M Group</i>
Overview	Collaboration Industry transformation and innovation	Leaders of change Transformation Integrated approach to sustainability
Future	Net-zero goals Commitments following scientific knowledge Roadmaps	Net-zero emissions Long-term plans Climate strategy Roadmap to transform business and industry
How to reach objectives	Circularity Lower-impact fibers Recycling Circular and sustainable design	Circular economy Design for circularity Focus on innovation Sustainable materials
Production	Safe and sustainable products Investments in regenerative farming and innovation	Sustainable production processes Innovation Efficiency and continuous improvements
Beyond legal requirements	Transformational commitments Collaboration for the planet Contribution to biodiversity Climate justice and intergenerational justice	Advocacy for systemic change Collaboration with experts and policymakers Sustainable community development
Reporting	Transparency and detailed reporting standards Extensive governance and policy updates	Transparent reporting Progress measurements External assessments Governance and stakeholder engagement

Source(s): Authors' own work

thematic analysis reveals the nuances and implications of their messaging strategies (Table 2).

5.1.1 *The strategic framing of responsibility.* In the “Responsibility” category, both H&M and Inditex emphasize their commitment to achieving net-zero GHG emissions by 2040. This goal aligns with the increasing regulatory pressures and heightened expectations from stakeholders, particularly given that the fashion industry accounts for approximately 2%–8% of global GHG emissions (UN alliance for sustainable fashion, 2021). However, a closer examination reveals that Inditex’s earlier commitment to a 10% reduction below 2019 levels lacked clarity regarding specific measures and the implementation scale. Although Inditex updated its climate strategy in 2023 to include more comprehensive plans for emissions reductions across its value chain, such as sourcing organic cotton and innovative fibers, the persistent absence of precise estimates for potential emissions reductions remains concerning.

This pattern of vague commitments highlights a broader trend in corporate communication, wherein companies often resort to ambiguous language, potentially leading to greenwashing (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). Research by TerraChoice (2007) categorizes these as “Sins of No Proof,” indicating a reliance on claims that lack substantial backing. Consequently, stakeholders are left with insufficient data to evaluate genuine sustainability impacts. While both companies project a strong commitment to environmental responsibility, the lack of concrete details on the actual outcomes of their initiatives is striking.

The “Responsibility” theme emerges from recurring elements in the companies’ reports, particularly the use of globally recognized, quantifiable terms such as “reduce,” “measure” and “disclose.” This culminates in their strategic commitment to net-zero emissions by 2040, a symbolic alignment with global climate governance that is crucial for maintaining legitimacy with investors and regulators (Suchman, 1995). Nevertheless, a detailed content analysis reveals that this communication is marked by quantifiable ambiguity. For instance, Inditex’s initial commitment to a 10% reduction below 2019 levels lacked clarity regarding the nature of offsets used and the total emissions neutralized. The absence of detailed reporting, even while setting targets for organic cotton and innovative fibers, hinders a precise assessment of potential reductions. External analyses have labeled these commitments as “ambiguous” and “unsubstantiated” (Day et al., 2023), underscoring that the company’s communication fails to facilitate external verification. Furthermore, the framing of efforts to pressure suppliers toward bioenergy as a positive GHG reduction

Table 2 Privileged themes in communication strategies

Themes	Inditex examples	H&M Group examples
Responsibility	“We have a common strategy – ‘Workers at the centre’ – which is articulated around social dialogue and employee well-being and empowerment in every area of the industry, with which we want to reach three million people by 2025”	“As a global company, we recognise the impacts our business has on people and the planet and we must take responsibility to address them, while working with others to enable necessary systemic change”
Transparency	“We recognise the importance of engaging with all our stakeholders about our progress”	“Leading transparency will no longer be defined by disclosure alone, but rather by transparency about impact and progress, going beyond legal requirements”
Circularity	“We also want to help our customers extend the useful life of our garments, so advancing towards a circular economy model”	“In collaboration with partners we are building a circular ecosystem that has many interconnected components. Each component relies on and impacts different actors, with different levels of maturity, and different challenges and opportunities”

Source(s): Authors’ own work

measure introduces unacknowledged environmental risks (Day *et al.*, 2023, 2024), demonstrating a strategy of selective disclosure. Similarly, H&M frequently emphasizes measures to support suppliers and source sustainable materials while systematically withholding details regarding the extent of emissions reductions or the GHG performance of these materials. This lack of transparency is a classic example of the “Sin of No Proof” (TerraChoice, 2007), where claims are made without readily available supporting data. Analysis shows that both companies depend on this tactic as a primary defense against external accountability.

In conclusion, the communication strategies adopted by H&M and Inditex are not entirely baseless, rather, they represent a strategic deployment of incomplete data. By outlining ambitious goals, both companies seek to position themselves as responsible corporate actors while simultaneously shielding themselves from scrutiny by omitting essential information necessary for accurately evaluating their progress.

5.1.2 Transparency: the crisis of a flawed discourse. The theme of “Transparency” emerged prominently through the use of terms associated with external scrutiny, accountability and consumer information. However, the analysis indicates that efforts to achieve transparency often fell short due to inconsistencies or led to significant credibility losses.

The findings reveal that Inditex emphasizes internal control measures, such as the establishment of an internal Sustainability Committee and adherence to general policies. However, the reports lack essential verification tools. Notably, there is no evidence of a publicly shared list of Tier 1 or Tier 2 suppliers, unlike H&M. In addition, the inconsistent reporting of production quantities, alternating between pieces and tonnes, strategically obscures the true extent of output (Fashion Revolution, 2024). The reliance on outdated documents from 2012 and 2015 in recent reports further indicates a lack of genuine commitment to timely disclosure.

H&M’s implementation of the Higg Index scorecards represented a concerted effort toward radical transparency. However, the analysis uncovers that the failure did not stem from the intent but rather the execution of the communication. Discrepancies in the data, such as misrepresenting negative water-use scores as savings (reported by Quartz, 2022), undermined the initiative. The subsequent removal of the scorecards and a temporary halt to the program illustrated an acknowledgment that flawed transparency can be more detrimental to a company’s legitimacy than having no transparency at all. H&M’s later reconsideration of the “Conscious” branding and its candid discussion of criticisms in the 2022 Sustainability Report, without explicitly using the term “greenwashing,” serves as an example of proactive communication aimed at restoring moral legitimacy.

Transparency is a complex, high-stakes strategy. Inditex mitigates its risk by restricting its disclosures, while H&M’s challenges with the Higg Index underscore the potential for externally validated tools to be manipulated for greenwashing if corporate execution is compromised. This conclusion requires clarification in relation to Table 1, which catalogues the high-accountability terminology used in both companies’ reports, terms such as “reduce,” “measure” and “disclose.” Rather than contradicting the finding of strategic ambiguity, this lexical pattern is precisely its mechanism: the consistent deployment of accountability-laden vocabulary creates the appearance of transparency without delivering its substance. Both companies use the language of verifiability (“measure” and “disclose”) while systematically withholding the underlying data that would enable external verification. For example, Inditex’s reports repeatedly reference “transparency initiatives” and “disclosed targets” while alternating between incompatible units of measurement (pieces vs tonnes) across reporting years, rendering trend analysis impossible. Similarly, H&M’s use of “Higg Index scorecards” used the language and form of scientific measurement but, as the Quartz investigation revealed, included data misrepresentations. Table 1 therefore does not evidence genuine transparency; rather, it maps the rhetorical infrastructure of strategic ambiguity, confirming rather than undermining the central argument. This pattern is

consistent with the “Sin of No Proof” identified by [TerraChoice \(2007\)](#), wherein accountability-oriented language substitutes for the provision of credible supporting evidence.

5.1.3 Circularity: the symbolic solution to a structural problem. The third thematic focus, “Circularity,” underscores both companies’ advocacy for circular economies, as often highlighted in their sustainability narratives. However, the evidence indicates a lack of genuine progression from linear to circular production models. The *Remake Report (2024)* points out that claims related to take-back programs lack clarity on how collected items are managed downstream, complicating stakeholders’ ability to fully understand these initiatives. While both firms present their circularity efforts, including recycling initiatives, they fail to share metrics that demonstrate these programs’ effectiveness. According to [Adamkiewicz et al. \(2022\)](#), superficial sustainability claims, particularly those involving minimal adjustments to specific product lines, can mislead consumers, as reflected in TerraChoice’s concept of the “Sins of Lesser of Two Evils.” Circularity emerges as a frequently cited solution for addressing environmental issues on both companies’ platforms, often positioned as essential to their mission.

The ongoing emphasis on limited initiatives such as H&M’s Conscious program and Inditex’s Join Life and Zara Pre-Owned illustrates the “Sin of Lesser of Two Evils” ([TerraChoice, 2007](#)). Although these materials may be marginally improved, they can divert attention from the more significant challenge posed by high production volumes ([Adamkiewicz et al., 2022](#)). The content analysis, as supported by the *Remake Report (Wicker, 2024)*, reveals a structural weakness in the circularity claims: neither company provides evidence that circular initiatives are set to replace traditional linear production. Instead, circularity is framed as an additional service, repair and take-back programs, running alongside the persistent unsustainable fast-fashion model. Moreover, the absence of information about the ultimate fate of collected garments, including potential export to the Global South, weakens these claims.

Circularity is often strategically positioned as a response to consumer concerns about waste, yet the communication fails to confront the critical issue identified by external research (Oslo Met University). This research emphasizes that reducing manufacturing volumes is essential for sustainability – an aspect conspicuously absent from their communications. Consequently, this reveals a preference for scalable solutions without real commitments to downscaling production, consistent with legitimacy and impression management dynamics that prioritize symbolic alignment over structural change.

5.2 Reflections on communication strategies

The analysis reveals that H&M Group and Inditex use sophisticated and adaptive communication strategies to manage greenwashing-related pressures, reflecting broader legitimacy and impression management dynamics. One prominent tactic is strategic ambiguity, where both companies use broad and vague scientific terminology while setting ambitious long-term sustainability goals. However, they often lack the transparent, verifiable short-term data necessary to substantiate these claims. Another approach is controlled disclosure, which involves balancing the need to publicly share sustainability data – for transparency purposes – with the requirement to protect sensitive business information and reduce regulatory risks. In addition, both companies frame circularity initiatives as supplementary offerings rather than as a fundamental shift from the traditional linear fast-fashion model, which can undermine genuine transformation.

This research highlights that while the companies’ sustainability roadmaps articulate aspirations for meaningful change, persistent issues such as unverified claims, misleading data presentations and the inherent tension between high-volume production and environmental goals hinder their ability to fully restore organizational legitimacy. In

summary, this thematic analysis indicates that although H&M Group and Inditex express intentions to mitigate their environmental impacts and promote social progress, significant discrepancies exist between their stated goals and the actual transparency of their sustainability practices. Their reliance on ambiguous claims, lack of sufficient data for independent verification and vague definitions of responsible practices suggest that both companies exist in a precarious space between authentic sustainability commitments and potential greenwashing. This underscores the necessity for more nuanced, data-driven evaluations of corporate sustainability communication, particularly in contexts where communication operates as a mechanism for managing legitimacy and shaping stakeholder perceptions. Future research should focus on examining the effectiveness of external audits and third-party certifications in enhancing corporate accountability and on initiatives that meaningfully contribute to a sustainable fashion industry.

Returning to the primary research question, what are companies' main communication strategies to address greenwashing accusations? (*RQ1*), the discussion above allows for a direct and structured response. The analysis demonstrates that H&M Group and Inditex rely on three interlocking strategic pillars: responsibility, manifested as ambitious, long-term GHG targets (net-zero by 2040) and supply chain engagement programs, which signal accountability to institutional stakeholders while deferring verifiable short-term progress; transparency, operationalized selectively through tools such as the Higg Index scorecards (H&M) and governance policy updates (Inditex), yet consistently undermined by inconsistent reporting, missing supplier lists and the absence of independently verified data; and circularity, deployed as a consumer-facing narrative of sustainable innovation through take-back programs, recycled material initiatives and circular design commitments, while structural production volumes remain unaddressed. Together, these three pillars constitute a coherent legitimacy management strategy that simultaneously projects environmental leadership and shields both companies from substantive external accountability. The study thus addresses O1 (challenges and opportunities of sustainable corporate practices) by identifying how communication serves as both an opportunity for legitimacy-building and a site of persistent credibility risk and addresses O2 (the relationship between corporate communication and greenwashing) by revealing how the strategic framing of sustainability can reproduce, rather than resolve, the conditions of greenwashing.

5.3 Implications

5.3.1 Theoretical implications. The findings extend the understanding of corporate communication within sustainability governance by conceptualizing it as a mechanism of legitimacy management and impression management dynamics under conditions of persistent reputational pressure. Rather than operating solely as a reputational or disclosure function, corporate communication emerges as a structuring force that shapes how sustainability is defined, evaluated and contested across global supply chains.

The identification of recurring communication pillars (transparency, responsibility and circularity) suggests that sustainability communication follows patterned logics through which organizations align symbolic commitments with stakeholder expectations. However, the absence of clear and comparable performance metrics reveals a structural tension between communicative visibility and substantive accountability.

This contributes to theoretical debates by highlighting how corporate communication not only reflects organizational practices but actively delineates the boundaries of what can be scrutinized and verified, reinforcing its role as a governance mechanism in contexts characterized by high legitimacy risk.

5.3.2 Practical implications. From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need for organizations to align sustainability communication more closely with measurable and

verifiable outcomes. The absence of clear and comparable metrics across companies limits the credibility of sustainability claims and increases exposure to greenwashing accusations.

The analysis also reveals inconsistencies between different communication channels, with corporate reports providing more detailed technical information while websites emphasize simplified and engagement-oriented narratives. This fragmentation may undermine stakeholder trust, suggesting the need for greater coherence and alignment across communication platforms.

In addition, the results indicate that circularity initiatives are frequently communicated as supplementary actions rather than as structural transformations of the business model. To enhance credibility, organizations should ensure that communication reflects substantive changes, particularly in relation to production practices and measurable impact, rather than relying on symbolic or isolated initiatives.

5.4 Research limitations and suggestions for future research

This study is subject to limitations related to scope, data sources and analytical approach. First, the analysis is restricted to publicly available corporate materials, namely official reports and website content, which represent self-disclosed communication and may not fully capture the breadth of organizational practices or external communication dynamics. Other channels, such as social media and press releases, were not included and may offer additional insights into how sustainability narratives are constructed and contested. Second, the study is temporally bounded to the 2019–2023 period. Given the evolving nature of sustainability practices and reporting standards, communication strategies may continue to develop beyond the timeframe considered. Third, the qualitative nature of the analysis involves interpretative coding of recurring themes. While a systematic approach was applied, the identification and categorization of themes are inherently dependent on analytical judgment, which may lead to alternative interpretations.

Future research could include interviews with company stakeholders to provide a more holistic view of how sustainability initiatives are perceived and implemented across different supply and value chain levels. Moreover, a quantitative study of the sentiment and frequency of keywords in sustainability communication materials could be carried out for more accurate, data-driven insights. Text mining and natural language processing are two methods that might be used to learn more about how frequently specific topics are brought up and if language or tone varies between different communication channels.

6. Conclusion

The data analyzed pointed out that corporate communication strategies used by H&M Group and Inditex to face greenwashing are focused on three main pillars: transparency, responsibility and circularity. In other words, these topics are used as a foundation to avoid misconceptions from their primary stakeholders. It also noted a precise balance between commitments and strategies to address environmental, social and economic impacts on both sides, as well as an understanding of the necessity of evolution in the fashion business, motivated by innovation, collaboration and long-term objectives.

The transparency pillar reveals that Inditex, and the H&M Group stress the importance of providing transparent, easily readable information on their performance and sustainability guidelines. Nevertheless, there are differences between how the two companies address this issue: while Inditex places a high priority on openness, emphasizing governance frameworks, comprehensive reporting requirements and policy updates, H&M Group emphasizes open communication with stakeholders and includes thorough progress updates and external audits and evaluations. The responsibility pillar indicates that Inditex offers distinct commitments and scientific consistency, while H&M Group emphasizes

transformation. However, both businesses have committed to reaching net-zero emissions by 2040, which aligns with the international climate goals of keeping warming to 1.5°C (IPCC, 2018). They intend to do so by setting and reaching intermediate goals. Their coordinated efforts highlight their understanding of the pressing need to address climate change and the need for structural transformation in the fashion sector. The circularity pillar shows that both companies highlight the importance of moving to a circular business model. H&M Group emphasizes the circular model through its creative design methods and sustainable materials. The company commits to reducing its dependence on virgin materials and integrating circular design into products. Inditex, on the other hand, incorporates circularity into its business operations. The launch of Zara Pre-Owned is part of the company's reported effort toward sustainability.

However, both companies are criticized for lacking transparency regarding handling clothing collected through their take-back programs and for increasing production volumes. Both initiatives are part of their circular programs. Regarding their communication channels, Inditex and H&M Group consistently present sustainability themes on their websites and reports. However, their documents offer more technical and progress-specific information, while their websites focus on consumer awareness and stakeholder engagement.

Concerning greenwashing, transparently collaborating and communicating with stakeholders enables H&M Group and Inditex to share knowledge and develop innovative solutions crucial for tackling climate change, resource management and social responsibility, thereby enhancing broader impact. Qualitative data indicated that both companies' strategies lack a precise, efficient and comparable measuring technique. Especially for Inditex, the reporting and transparency have been deemed insufficient. These findings are consistent with the study from [Amel-Zadeh and Serafeim \(2018\)](#), who contend that the main impediment to the implementation of ESG inside companies is the lack of standardized reporting criteria.

Moreover, the results are in line with [Vries et al. \(2015\)](#), [Forehand and Grier \(2003\)](#) and [Yoon et al. \(2006\)](#). Such stakeholders often see business communications about environmental issues as more symbolic than real. People may be dubious of a company's environmental declarations and question the underlying motivations behind them. The data aligns with these researchers: Companies need to find ways to communicate their sustainability undertakings, keeping in mind stakeholders' perceptions.

Also, these results also need to be understood within the global supply chain context, where Asia plays a central role in textile and garment production. Both H&M Group and Inditex rely heavily on production networks in countries such as Bangladesh, Vietnam, China and India, where environmental pressures and labor concerns are most acute ([Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017](#); [ILO, 2017](#); [World Bank, 2019](#)). This reinforces the relevance of their communication strategies not only for global audiences but also for the future of sustainable fashion in Asia and beyond, where the stakes of greenwashing practices are particularly high.

In this sense, addressing sustainability communication within the Asian production context remains central to understanding how global fashion brands translate their environmental and social commitments into practice.

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