Semiotic Analysis of the *H&M Conscious Exclusive A/W20* Advertisement: Exploring Sustainability Issues and Greenwashing Practices

Emillia Della[1], Naila Oxandiya[2], Ghanesya Hari Murti[3], Gullit Tornado Taufan[4]
210110101032@unej.ac.id[1], 210110101082@unej.ac.id[2], ghanesyaharimurti@unej.ac.id[3], gullittaufan@polije.ac.id[4]

Affiliation: English Department of Universitas Jember[123],
Language, Communication, and Tourism Department Politeknik Negeri Jember[4]

Abstract

This study investigated the sustainability claims of H&M's Conscious Exclusive A/W20 campaign, focusing on the potential use of greenwashing strategies. The research addressed the gap between the brand's eco-friendly image and its actual practices. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic method, the study examined the visual and verbal signs in the advertisement to uncover their denotative and connotative meanings. The findings revealed that while the campaign promoted environmental responsibility through recycled materials, its messages largely served as marketing tools rather than evidence of genuine sustainable practices. It means that there was a gap between the sustainability claims and actual practices in the campaign. The advertisement falls under the category of Green-washed Commercial Advertising, indicating that H&M's sustainability narrative might be more symbolic than substantive. From the results of this study, it can be concluded that transparency is essential for brands to avoid misleading consumers and to ensure trust in sustainability efforts

Keywords: Sustainability, Greenwashing, Semiotic, Fashion Industry

Introduction

The issues of sustainability and environmental awareness have evolved into increasingly significant global trends, particularly in the last few decades. Various sectors, ranging from transportation to technology, have begun to integrate eco-friendly and sustainable concepts as part of their business strategies. Sustainability issues have also become more prominent in the fashion industry, reflecting a collective awareness to foster more responsible practices in fashion production and consumption. This trend has extended to major events such as the Met Gala, which in 2024 adopted the theme "The Garden of Time." This theme was rooted in a short story by J.G. Ballard, which tells about the efforts to preserve fragile beauty and tranquility, though ultimately succumbing to inevitable destruction. The exhibition "Sleeping Beauties: Reawakening Fashion" that inspired this theme showcased garments too fragile to be worn again, highlighting the ephemeral nature of beauty and cultural heritage. With sub-themes of Land, Sea, and Sky, this exhibition also portrayed the relationship between fashion, nature, and the cycles of time (Ramzi, 2024). The theme invited reflection on how humanity strives to preserve and

appreciate beauty amid uncertainty and change, aligning with the sustainability concept that advocates for the responsible use of natural resources for future generations.

The fashion industry is known as one of the largest contributors to environmental pollution, whether through intensive production processes, the use of chemicals, or textile waste. On average, this sector accounts for 20% of global wastewater, with consumers discarding 32 kg of clothing annually. Globally, fashion is the third-largest polluter, following the construction and food industries, contributing around 10% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions due to long supply chains and energy-intensive production processes (Öndoğan et al., 2022).Several brands, such as Stella McCartney and Patagonia, have long adopted sustainable practices. Patagonia, for instance, emphasizes the use of eco-friendly materials and ethical production as part of its commitment to environmental activism. Meanwhile, H&M, a major player in fast fashion, claims commitment to sustainability by launching its Conscious Collection, which utilizes organic and recycled materials.

However, amidst H&M's sustainability campaigns, criticism has emerged that the brand is engaged in greenwashing, a marketing strategy that falsely conveys environmental commitment to attract consumers. H&M has faced legal action over allegations of greenwashing, with claims that their promotion of eco-friendly products and recycling programs mislead consumers. An investigation by Quartz revealed that more than half of H&M's sustainability profiles were inaccurate, leading to their removal following criticism from Norwegian authorities (Sierra, 2024). This phenomenon raised an important question: Does H&M's campaign truly meet the criteria for eco-advertising, or is it merely a greenwashing strategy with socially appealing messages for environmentally conscious consumers?

Eco-advertising should focus on corporate responsibility towards the environment and sustainability (An'Umillah & Sudradjat, 2024). Stated by Banerjee, Gulas, and Iyes, eco-advertising promotes products or services by emphasizing their relationship with the environment, encouraging eco-friendly lifestyles, or building a company's image as environmentally conscious (Fill & Penz, 2022). Green advertising in Routledge Handbooks in Linguistics (Fill & Penz, 2022) is divided into three sub-genres: Green Commercial Advertising, Green-washed Commercial Advertising, and Green Nonprofit/Social Advertising. Green Commercial Advertising includes advertisements for genuinely eco-friendly products, such as renewable energy sources, organic food, biodegradable products, and low-emission vehicles. It also includes semi-green products that use nature-related imagery to promote themselves as eco-friendly. Green-washed Commercial Advertising comprises advertisements that misrepresent non-green products as environmentally friendly by downplaying their ecological impact. For instance, an ad may highlight low emissions while hiding high fuel consumption. This form of advertising is often used to ease negative perceptions following environmental controversies, such as pollution incidents. Green Nonprofit/Social Advertising includes non-commercial campaigns aimed at raising ecological awareness and encouraging social action. Topics discussed may include animal rights, pollution reduction, and wildlife conservation, with the aim of motivating individuals to align with environmental values. However, in an era where greenwashing practices are increasingly common,

distinguishing between genuine and manipulative eco-friendly advertising has become a challenge.

Previous studies, such as Semiotic Analysis of 'Hyundai Presents Re:Style 2020' Green Marketing on Automotive Ads and Green Marketing Representation of Le Minerale Advertising Economy: Circular Movement #Jadibarulagi's Version, have focused on corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the context of advertising that promotes sustainability (An'Umillah & Sudradjat, 2024; Pradana et al., 2023). These studies highlighted semiotic elements in conveying green marketing messages but did not address critiques related to greenwashing. Additionally, they tended to evaluate short-term responsibilities portrayed in advertising campaigns. In contrast, this research focused more on brands that have faced greenwashing criticism, such as H&M, aiming to analyze the development of corporate responsibility over time, from advertising creation to current conditions. This study sought to determine whether the sustainability responsibility they claim has evolved or remained consistent with existing critiques, to reveal whether their campaigns are truly eco-advertising or still merely greenwashing.

This research made a significant contribution by combining semiotic analysis and sustainability evaluation, focusing not only on the short-term messages in advertisements but also tracking whether companies have responded to criticism by improving their practices or merely maintaining manipulative sustainability images. This study was important as it provided insights for consumers, regulators, and the industry regarding the authenticity of corporate sustainability claims. By highlighting whether corporate sustainability campaigns are backed by real actions or remain a greenwashing strategy, this research helped strengthen public trust in brands claiming eco-friendliness and encourages companies to be more transparent and responsible regarding their environmental impact.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to explore the hidden meanings in H&M's video advertisement titled H&M Conscious Exclusive A/W20. Bilhaq (as cited in Dewayani, 2024) argues that this method is suitable for examining phenomena that cannot be measured quantitatively but can be interpreted through language and/or sign. The research focused on how sustainability messages were conveyed through visual and verbal signs, and how these messages influence consumer perceptions.

Barthes' semiotics emphasizes the relationship between signs, their literal meaning (denotation), and their cultural meaning (connotation). Barthes (as cited in Wibisono, 2021) argues that signs in advertisements do not merely carry direct meanings but also construct myths—discourses that reinforce the ideological values of society. In the media context, myths shape perceptions of issues such as beauty or sustainability, often manipulating meanings to align with commercial goals. This manipulation creates a "metalanguage" that obscures the true meaning (Permatasari, 2022).

The research materials included the H&M Conscious Exclusive A/W20 campaign video, as well as various literature on greenwashing, sustainability, and ecolinguistics. Additionally, the study examined H&M's official sustainability reports and recent news to assess the company's actual commitment to sustainability.

There were several stages involved in the data analysis. First, the visual and verbal elements of the advertisement were identified to reveal their denotative meanings. Second, connotative meanings were analyzed by linking these signs to their social and cultural contexts. Subsequently, the sustainability claims were evaluated for potential greenwashing—where companies cultivate an eco-friendly image that did not reflect their actual practices. The final results were categorized into Green Commercial Advertising, Green-washed Commercial Advertising, and Green Nonprofit/Social Advertising to provide insights into H&M's sustainability communication strategies.

Results and Discussion

The H&M Conscious Exclusive A/W20 advertisement, featured on H&M's official YouTube channel, highlighted the brand's commitment to sustainability in the fashion industry. Uploaded on November 18, 2020, the 40-second video showcased innovations in using recycled materials and sustainable practices to create an exclusive collection. It addressed the issue of fashion waste, emphasizing the importance of ethical production and consumption through creative design processes with eco-friendly fabrics.

However, H&M has faced two lawsuits accusing it of greenwashing related to its Conscious Choice line (Mon & Rogers, 2023). The first lawsuit was dismissed by a Missouri court, as H&M was deemed sufficiently transparent in its sustainability claims. Six months later, a new lawsuit was filed, focusing on allegations that the products were actually made from synthetic or non-organic materials, despite being marketed as recycled or organic. This underscored the legal risks companies face when their eco-friendly claims are perceived as misleading.

Denotative and Connotative Analysis

The research findings revealed that green marketing strategies in H&M's advertisement can be observed through five scenes in the 40-second video. In the first scene, a man was shown carrying a bag of used bottles on his back, which he disposed of in a trash or recycling bin. The second scene featured a woman throwing a bag of plastic waste into a recycling bin. Next, a waste shredder and processing machine that transforms waste into clothing were displayed, highlighting the recycling process. In the fourth scene, the process of creating recycled clothing was showcased. Finally, the fifth scene showed several models on a rooftop, with one of them wearing an outfit made from recycled fabric.

Figure 1. A Man with a Bag of Used Bottles

In this scene, a man wearing a cream shirt, a coat, and a black sling bag was shown carrying a plastic bag filled with used bottles, which he disposed of in a blue recycling bin. Denotatively, this scene depicted the act of disposing of used bottles into a recycling bin, illustrating behavior that supported environmental preservation. Connotatively, the text "Where some see waste, we see potential" invited the audience to shift their perspective, emphasizing that what was considered waste still holded the potential for repurposing. This message created a positive narrative around recycling and encourages consumers to participate in sustainability efforts. On a mythological level, the scene challenged the notion that used items lack value. By portraying a character who acted responsibly toward the environment, H&M established itself as an innovative and environmentally conscious brand, reinforcing its sustainability campaign in the fashion industry.

Figure 2. A Woman with a Bag of Plastic Waste

This scene showed a woman wearing a black coat and cream trousers placing a bag of plastic waste into a recycling bin, illustrating awareness of proper waste management. The narrative “Where some see rubbish, we see beauty” emphasized the connotation that waste was not merely something to be discarded but had the potential to be transformed into something valuable and beautiful. This message encouraged a shift in mindset about waste and implied that sustainability can be achieved through innovation. At a mythological level, the advertisement sought to challenge the perception that waste had no value while reinforcing H&M’s image as a brand capable of finding beauty in things considered worthless.

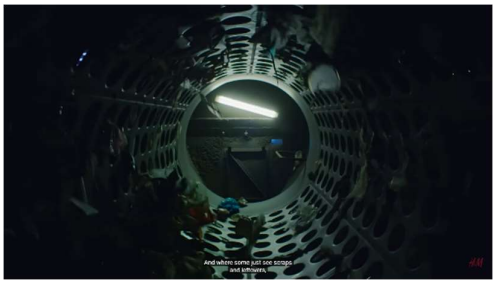

Figure 3. Recycling Process

This scene depicted a waste shredder spinning with green light, processing various types of waste, including banana peels and berries. The text "And where some just see scraps and leftovers, we see the beginning of something new" provided a denotative meaning that illustrated the technical process of recycling, showing how waste was transformed into new materials. Connotatively, the text emphasized that waste can mark the beginning of something valuable, projecting an optimistic view of the recycling process. At a mythological level, this scene challenged the notion that waste had no utility, with H&M leveraging technology to turn it into something new and useful.

Figure 4. Making Clothes from Recycled Waste

This scene showed the process of fabric production and sewing a yellow garment with soft patterns. The text "Because we're changing fashion, starting with the things that used to be thrown away" denoted the physical steps of transforming threads into clothing. Connotatively, this text implied that H&M was not merely recycling but also innovating, highlighting its active role in reshaping perceptions of fashion and sustainability. At a mythological level, the advertisement dispelled the belief that fashion and sustainability cannot coexist, reinforcing H&M's image as a pioneer in driving the industry toward more sustainable practices.

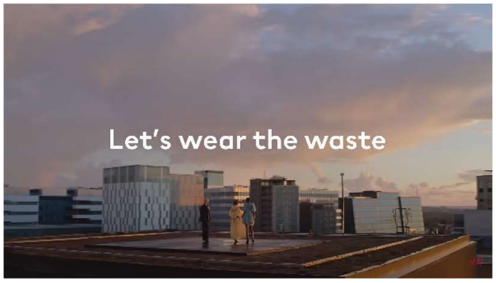

Figure 5. A Group of Models in Recycled Outfits

This scene featured three models on a rooftop wearing garments made from recycled fabric, interacting and smiling at each other. The narratives "So from now on, let's wear the waste" and "Let's change fashion" denoted that the clothes worn were the final products of the recycling process depicted in previous scenes. Connotatively, these texts encouraged consumers to feel proud of wearing garments made from waste while emphasizing the importance of collaboration and social interaction among sustainable fashion users. At a mythological level, the advertisement challenged the perception that fashion is solely about newness and glamour, reshaping the view that eco-friendly fashion cannot be appealing. H&M asserted that fashion and sustainability can go hand in hand.

Evaluating Sustainability Messages and the Validity of H&M's Claims

H&M's advertisement highlighted sustainability through five key scenes. The first scene featured a man disposing of a used bottle into a recycling bin, inviting the audience to see waste as potential. The second scene showed a woman throwing plastic waste into a recycling bin, delivering the message that waste can be transformed into something valuable. The third scene depicted the recycling process, turning waste into useful materials. The fourth scene demonstrated the creation of recycled clothing, emphasizing innovation in sustainable fashion. Lastly, the fifth scene presented models wearing recycled clothing, challenging the perception that fashion must always be new and glamorous. The advertisement asserted that fashion and sustainability can coexist, reinforcing H&M's image as an environmentally conscious brand.

Evaluating Claims against Actual Practices

In 2022, H&M reported using 85% of materials categorized as "more sustainable," with a target of achieving 100% by 2030 (H&M Group, 2023a). These materials included organic cotton, recycled polyester, and responsibly sourced viscose. H&M has also committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 56% by 2030 and achieving net-zero emissions by 2040.

However, the report also highlighted challenges. H&M's operating profit in 2022 declined due to external factors such as high inflation and the war in Ukraine. Global economic pressures affected the company's sustainability strategies, with rising energy and logistics costs impacting its ability to invest further in green technologies.

Based on the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines, H&M has provided relevant data on material management, waste, carbon emissions, and water usage. In 2022 (H&M Group, 2023b), H&M set measurable targets for sustainable materials, focusing on recycled materials like polyester and organic cotton. They also reported reductions in plastic use and implemented circular packaging strategies. However, the reported data primarily consisted of percentages, making it difficult to track the actual volume of waste produced. In 2023 (H&M Group, 2024a), H&M increased its focus on water management by setting a target to reduce water usage by 30% across its supply chain by 2030.

H&M consistently reports greenhouse gas emissions across Scope 1, 2, and 3. In 2022, they achieved an absolute reduction in emissions. However, emissions reporting for sold products, which significantly impact the company's carbon footprint, remained insufficiently detailed. In 2023, H&M aimed to increase the use of renewable electricity in its stores and production facilities, but post-sale product emissions reporting continues to pose challenges.

To ensure sustainability in its supply chain, H&M launched the Sustainable Impact Partnership Programme (SIPP), aimed at monitoring supplier performance using strict sustainability criteria (H&M Group, 2024b). In 2023, 70% of their primary supplier factories were assessed using the Higg Index environmental module, a globally recognized tool for measuring textile factory environmental impacts. Despite progress, challenges remain, particularly in the second- and third-tier supply chains that have not been fully verified for environmental and social compliance.

Oversight of H&M's supply chain revealed ongoing efforts to screen suppliers based on environmental and social criteria. However, comprehensive reporting on negative impacts on supply chain workers remained lacking. In 2023, H&M enhanced oversight of risks such as child labor and forced labor, particularly in high-risk countries regarding human rights. While the GRI Index showed progress in areas like sustainable materials and carbon emissions, H&M must improve transparency regarding the social and environmental impacts across its entire supply chain.

H&M has received external recognition for its sustainability efforts, including an A- rating from CDP for its contributions to combating climate change and a high ranking on the Dow Jones Sustainability Index for 12 consecutive years. Additionally, H&M has been acknowledged by the Textile Exchange as one of six brands leading transformational change in the materials index, achieved the highest ranking in the Fossil Free Fashion Scorecard by Stand.earth, and secured the second position in the Fashion Accountability Report 2024.

Despite these accolades, criticisms persist. One notable critique targeted the use of recycled polyester derived from plastic bottles, which some argue contradicts true circularity principles. Recycling plastic bottles into polyester for clothing reduced the likelihood of those bottles being recycled within the beverage industry's closed-loop cycle. In response, H&M began shifting its focus toward "circular" polyester made from old clothing and textile waste—a step more aligned with long-term sustainability goals. They have also partnered with the startup Syre to develop this recycling technology, committing a $600 million investment over seven years (Wenzel, 2024).

H&M Advertising Categorization

H&M has made efforts to present itself as an environmentally friendly company through various initiatives, such as using recycled materials and setting ambitious targets to reduce environmental impact. Although H&M reports that 85% of the materials used in its products are categorized as "more sustainable," serious questions aroused regarding the selection of these materials, particularly recycled polyester from plastic bottles. The use of such recycled materials was criticized for not fully aligning with ideal circularity

principles, which emphasized reprocessing materials within closed cycles rather than creating new products that ultimately add to waste. This raised doubts about whether H&M's products truly met the sustainability standards they advertised.

Moreover, H&M frequently faces sharp criticism regarding the environmental and social impacts of its fast fashion business model. Advertisements emphasizing sustainability claims are often perceived as strategies to improve the company's image in consumers' eyes rather than reflecting fundamental changes in business practices. These campaigns appear more focused on mitigating criticism and fostering a positive perception of sustainability, despite significant challenges persisting within their supply chain.

Transparency is also a recurring issue in H&M's sustainability communication. While the company publishes data on recycled material usage and emissions reduction efforts, this data is often presented as percentages without providing a clear picture of actual waste volumes or the overall impact of their operations. This lack of clarity leaves room for misleading interpretations, where consumers may overestimate the significance of their sustainability efforts.

Although H&M has sought to position itself as an eco-friendly brand through initiatives like the "Conscious Collection," the company is frequently accused of greenwashing. This is particularly due to the fact that sustainable collections represent only a small portion of H&M's overall production, while their core fast fashion business continues to have significant environmental impacts, such as excessive textile waste and water consumption.

Furthermore, while H&M emphasizes its sustainability initiatives, its underlying fast fashion model fundamentally contradicts sustainability principles. As one of the largest fast fashion companies in the world, H&M perpetuates excessive consumerism by constantly launching new products and encouraging consumers to buy more clothes. This business model generates more waste, fuels overconsumption, and extends resource-intensive production cycles.

In summary, although H&M strives to present itself as a brand committed to sustainability, its practices reveal inconsistencies between marketing promises and on-the-ground realities. This strengthens the perception that the company uses sustainability more as a marketing strategy than as a genuine commitment to comprehensive sustainable practices. Despite some steps toward becoming more eco-friendly, H&M's actions are often regarded as greenwashing, as they fail to address the root issues of their highly impactful business model. Considering these factors, H&M's advertisements tend to reflect the practices of commercial greenwashing. Rather than demonstrating a true commitment to sustainability, their campaigns appear to leverage sustainability as a marketing tool to attract consumer attention without resolving the fundamental challenges of their business operations.

Conclusion

This study highlighted a focus on analyzing H&M's sustainability responsibilities and the authenticity of their claims regarding greenwashing. The results indicated that although H&M has strived to project an image of being a company committed to sustainability through advertisements and initiatives involving recycled materials, there was significant gap between these claims and their actual practices. The advertisements were primarily aimed at creating a positive perception among consumers, without being supported by fundamental changes in business practices that impact the environment. This study also emphasized the need for transparency in sustainability communication. The lack of clear information regarding the environmental impact of products can mislead consumers and damage the company's reputation if sustainability claims are proven to be inaccurate.

For future research, it is recommended that scholars explore comparative analyses between brands in the fashion industry and examine how consumers respond to sustainability claims. A multidisciplinary approach could provide deeper insights into the dynamics of sustainability within this industry.

References

An'Umillah, S. A., & Sudradjat, R. H. (2024). *Semiotic Analysis of "Hyundai Presents Re:Style 2020" Green Marketing on Automotive Ads*. *12*.

Dewayani, A. R. (2024). Representation of Gender Equality in the "Barbie" Film: Semiotic Analysis of Roland Barthes. *Jurnal Lensa Mutiara Komunikas*. https://doi.org/10.51544/jlmk.v8i1.4952

Fill, A., & Penz, H. (Eds.). (2022). *The Routledge handbook of ecolinguistics* (First issued in paperback). Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

H&M Group. (2023a). *HM Group Annual and Sustainability Report 2022* [Anual Report].

H&M Group. (2023b). *H&M Group GRI Index 2022*.

H&M Group. (2024a). *HM Group Annual and Sustainability Report 2023* [Anual Report].

H&M Group. (2024b). *H&M Group GRI Index 2023*.

Mon, G., & Rogers, K. (2023, December 15). H&M Faces New Allegations of Greenwashing. *Kelley Drye & Warren*. https://www.kelleydrye.com/viewpoints/blogs/ad-law-access/h-m-faces-new-allegations-of-greenwashing

Öndoğan, E. N., Öndoğan, Z., & Topuzoğlu, B. (2022). A Study on the Investigation of Sustainability Practices of Global Brands in the Fashion Market. *Ege Academic Review*, *22*(4), 393–412. https://doi.org/10.21121/eab.1104962

Permatasari, R. D. (2022). Meaning of Corporate Advertising of PT. The Chevron "We Agree" On Television (Semiotic Analysis by Roland Barthes). *COMMENTATE: Journal of Communication Management*, *3*(1), 52. https://doi.org/10.37535/103003120225

Pradana, Y., Arifputri, A. N., & Haqqu, R. (2023). *Green Marketing Representation of Le Minerale Advertising Economy Sircular Movement #Jadibarulagi's Version*.

Ramzi, L. (2024, Maay). The 2024 Met Gala Dress Code, Explained. *VOGUE*. https://www.vogue.com/article/met-gala-dress-code-2024

Sierra, B. (2024, August 17). H&M is Being Sued For "Misleading" Sustainability Marketing. What Does This Mean for the Future of Greenwashing? *The Sustainable Fashion Forum*. https://www.thesustainablefashionforum.com/pages/hm-is-being-sued-for-misleading-sustainability-marketing-what-does-this-mean-for-the-future-of-greenwashing

Wenzel, E. (2024, March 26). Why H&M is turning away from polyester recycled from bottles. *TRELLIS*. https://trellis.net/article/why-hm-turning-away-polyester-recycled-bottles/

Wibisono, P. (2021). *Analisis Semiotika Roland Barthes dalam Film Bintang Ketjil Karya Wim Umboh dan Misbach Tusa Bira*. *1*(1). https://doi.org/doi.org/10.32509/dinamika.v7i1.1406