

# How 'woke' marketing lets fast fashion brands get away with environmental and labor abuses

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Despite growing awareness of the environmental and social consequences of fast fashion, the overproduction and overconsumption of clothes continues. To attract a more mindful public, fashion brands have employed "woke" marketing tactics and published adverts that illustrate a political and social awareness around race, LGBTQ+, feminism and the environment.

Famously, sportswear brand [Nike](#) used images of NFL player Colin Kaepernick's anti-racism protest in a marketing campaign. You may also recall Dior's [€750](#) (£640) T-shirt printed with the slogan "we should all be feminists," a phrase taken from author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's feminist TEDx talk which was later used in Beyoncé's song Flawless.

Fashion can be a useful vehicle for political messaging—until someone asks who makes the clothing. The Spice Girls sported T-shirts with the slogan "#IWANNABEASPICEGIRL" in 2018 to highlight gender pay disparity and promote women's empowerment. It was later revealed that seamstresses making these T-shirts earned poverty wages in [Bangladesh](#).

Fashion retailer [Shein](#) paid influencers to visit its factories in China and post videos lauding the working conditions there. An investigation by Swiss human rights organization Public Eye later [confirmed](#) that many of these [garment workers](#) were working about 75 hours a week.

In new [research](#), I uncovered how Swedish fashion companies disproportionately target women with adverts that promise ethical or sustainable consumption, obscuring the environmental and social harm

of their supply chains in the process.

## Greenwashing in Sweden

Sweden is home to fast-fashion giant H&M and other [global brands](#), many of which engage in green advertising.

In one Instagram advert I analyzed, Swedish influencer Bianca Ingrosso made a paid post for fashion company Gina Tricot promoting the brand's pledge to use proceeds from its sales to create a forest and install commercial bee hives in Denmark.

A couple of years later, it was [revealed](#) that only 503 [young trees](#) were planted on behalf of Gina Tricot by the organization Ecotree on a piece of land in Denmark too small to be called a forest. Only two hives were installed (Ecotree [stated](#) that Gina Tricot only paid for two years of beehive maintenance, which was later [extended](#) by another year).

In another Instagram story, the brand Kappahl presented three women in white T-shirts and jeans overlaid with the text "DO YOUR PART" as part of their Instagram story series titled "Responsible," which included promotion of a take-back scheme that allows customers to donate unwanted clothes in exchange for a discount. In yet another example, an influencer states that Rönisch is a brand "by women for women that makes sustainable activewear."

These adverts are often vague, and the product is not always related to the cause or initiative being promoted. However, the underlying message remains the same: women can make the world better by shopping.

As a consumer, it can be hard to distinguish a savvy public relations campaign from a genuine willingness to change. For many years, Swedish H&M-owned brand Monki championed body-size inclusivity in

its marketing and communications. At the beginning of 2024, the brand announced it was [removing plus-size products from its lines](#) due to a lack of consumer demand. This was met with considerable [criticism](#).

## **Women and conscious consumption**

There is a reason why companies peddle these narratives to women specifically. Consumer surveys tend to show that women are more likely to make sustainable lifestyle choices, whereas [research](#) suggests that in some cases, men go out of their way to do the opposite to protect their masculine identity.

There is an old but prevailing stereotype of women as inherently nurturing and caring. When women are targeted with "green" or "feminist" advertisements, they are encouraged to exercise their innate capacity for care through the act of consumption. Instead of telling everyone to consume less, women are told to consume certain products over others, which might lead to more consumption overall.

Women are also traditionally associated with consumer decisions and the household, which is why advertising has always predominantly targeted women.

Making the environment a matter of individual responsibility, with a particular product as the solution, takes the prospect of political commitment out of solving systemic problems and distracts from the potential for collective action. In most cases, using what you already own is preferable to buying more stuff.

Belief in the nurturing woman is used to justify overconsumption and refashion it as sustainable and ethical. Pro-feminist and environmental advertising exploits the idea of care—whether that be caring for your clothes by washing them correctly and ensuring they last longer, or

caring for the environment by donating your unwanted clothes (even if they end up in a landfill in Kenya).

It's telling that these feel-good campaigns don't extend to the [women](#) garment workers who have been [reported](#) to [earn very little](#) in factories that [may simply be adding](#) to environmental calamity.

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