

Fast fashion is trying an Earth-friendly makeover. Is it real?

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5 H&M is investing in offshore wind to help power garment manufacturers in Bangladesh. Zara has produced a line of clothes made from recycled fibers, as well as resale and donation services. Primark is testing its garments to better withstand daily wear and tear. There are enough of these sorts of announcements to make you wonder: Has fast fashion embraced sustainability? Or are these token efforts — perhaps designed to assuage any customer guilt that buying cheap clothes comes at the expense of the planet?

10 Industry experts say some of it is about brand reputation. Fast-fashion companies are trying to counter the criticism, especially resonant with younger shoppers, that their business model encourages overconsumption and waste. But some companies also recognize the market opportunities and cost-saving benefits that can come with more sustainable practices.

Here's a look at some of what fast-fashion brands are doing to be more sustainable, what may be motivating those efforts and how to avoid getting fooled by greenwashing.

20 The detrimental impact of clothing production and the associated waste is well documented. Producing textiles is typically a resource-intensive process that guzzles water while spewing greenhouse gases and pollution. And the fashion industry is responsible for as much as 10 percent of the world's carbon emissions. Clothes also often wind up in landfills.

25 Brands have made varying degrees of effort to address these issues. Of 42 fashion brands analyzed for Stand.earth's most recent scorecard, 40 offered resale or repair, and 14 reported a sustained reduction of carbon emissions. But 17 had increased their carbon footprint in comparison to their baseline year.

30 A recent McKinsey report on the fashion industry similarly assessed that nearly two-thirds of brands are behind on their 2030 decarbonization goals, and many have recently deprioritized sustainability. That may remain the case as the Trump administration pledges to roll back various environmental initiatives and the European Union has also delayed certain sustainability reporting requirements.

35 But the McKinsey report concluded that climate change “will remain a potent force across fashion supply chains and in driving consumer behaviour.” Brands that choose to adopt a long-term sustainability strategy “will be rewarded.”

40 Experts say sustainability is a factor that a broadening segment of shoppers appear to care about — to a point. “There is this momentum toward sustainability and circularity in fashion, it really is being accelerated by consumer demand, because Gen Z and also younger millennials are really redefining what it means to be a conscious shopper.”

45 Some of these consumers are active on social media and are quick to call out brands for greenwashing or celebrate those that are following through on their sustainability efforts. If fast fashion brands are able to invest in sustainability while enhancing their products and keeping costs down, they could draw customers who otherwise might have hesitated to buy from them.