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A Review on Upcycling as A Strategic Marketing Tool for Sustainability in The Fashion Industry: A Critical Review

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***Abstract*:** *The primary objective of this study is to systematically evaluate, analyze, and synthesize prior research regarding upcycling as a strategic marketing tool for sustainability in the fashion industry.. This study employs a critical review methodology to rigorously assess the strengths, weaknesses, and methodological validity of selected literature, with the objective of identifying theoretical gaps and inconsistencies within the current body of knowledge. Main findings reveal that while the existing literature demonstrates strengths, such as comprehensive topic coverage, practical real-world brand examples, and a clear examination of greenwashing, it suffers from several significant critical weaknesses. Specifically, the findings highlight severe methodological limitations, an overreliance on non-academic sources, and a problematic conflation of strategic marketing with genuine sustainability practices.*

Abstrak : *Tujuan utama penelitian ini adalah untuk mengevaluasi, menganalisis, dan mensintesis secara sistematis penelitian-penelitian sebelumnya mengenai upcycling sebagai alat pemasaran strategis untuk keberlanjutan di industri mode. Penelitian ini menggunakan metodologi tinjauan kritis untuk menilai secara ketat kelebihan, kelemahan, dan validitas metodologis dari literatur yang dipilih, dengan tujuan mengidentifikasi kesenjangan teoretis dan inkonsistensi dalam khazanah pengetahuan saat ini. Temuan utama menunjukkan bahwa meskipun literatur yang ada memiliki kelebihan, seperti cakupan topik yang komprehensif, contoh merek nyata yang praktis, dan pemeriksaan yang jelas terhadap greenwashing, literatur tersebut memiliki beberapa kelemahan kritis yang signifikan. Secara khusus, temuan tersebut menyoroti keterbatasan metodologis yang parah, ketergantungan yang berlebihan pada sumber non-akademis, serta penggabungan yang bermasalah antara pemasaran strategis dengan praktik keberlanjutan yang sejati.*

Keywords : *Critical Review, Fashion Industry, Strategic Marketing, Sustainability, Upcycling*

INTRODUCTION

The textile sector, which employs tens of millions of people worldwide, is one of the multinational corporations that provides basic human requirements (Harsanto et al., 2024). Since it is the second most basic human need after food and water (Srivastav et al., 2021), it continues to be a key source of revenue for most nations (Memon et al., 2022). The Earth is seen to be distinct from the other planets in our solar system because it offers favorable circumstances for life (Periyasamy & Militky, 2020). The world's population is currently estimated to be 7.6 billion, but researchers predict that by 2050, it will be closer

to 9.8 billion (Periyasamy & Militky, 2020). In a society that is expanding quickly and continuously, the development in digitization makes globalization easier in many contexts and aspects of people's everyday lives (Ofori et al., 2025).

Businesses and nations must start changing their business practices to ensure the planet's existence in light of the growing environmental movement (Ofori et al., 2025). In the context of textiles and fashion, various companies, fashion houses, and stakeholders are getting more and more excited about discovering creative ways to consume and produce eco-friendly products for their customers (Khan et al., 2023). Upcycling is a successful method of turning textile or fashion waste that would have otherwise ended up in a landfill into high-value new goods (Han et al., 2017). The significance of upcycling offers a distinctive design thinking approach for product innovation, waste reduction to reduce environmental impacts, and an increase in consumer enthusiasm for a more sustainable and friendly product (Bhatt et al., 2019). The purpose of the study is systematically evaluate, analyze, and synthesize prior research (Ofori et al., 2025). It aims to assess the quality and validity of previous studies to advance the theoretical and practical understanding of a given field.

METHOD

This study employs a critical review methodology (Anh, 2024; Dede et al., 2026; Franzke et al., 2022; Marks et al., 2026; Mêda et al., 2026; Sawant et al., 2024) to systematically examine, evaluate, and synthesize existing research (Ofori et al., 2025). Unlike a traditional narrative review, a critical review goes beyond summarizing previous findings by rigorously assessing the strengths, weaknesses, and methodological validity of the selected study. The objective is to identify theoretical gaps, inconsistencies, and emerging trends within the current body of knowledge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The paper effectively covers multiple dimensions of upcycling, including technical aspects, benefits, marketing strategies, and ethical concerns (Ofori et al., 2025). The breadth of coverage from upcycling techniques to greenwashing demonstrates an attempt at holistic analysis. The inclusion of specific upcycling methodologies, ranging from traditional techniques like sashiko and boro to advanced chemical processes, provides substantial practical detail (Ofori et al., 2025).

The introduction effectively establishes the urgency of the sustainability problem in fashion through compelling statistics (Ofori et al., 2025). The paper clearly articulates the scale of textile waste and environmental degradation, making a strong case for why alternative approaches like upcycling matter (Ofori et al., 2025).

The inclusion of real-world case studies of fashion brands adopting upcycling, provides concrete illustrations of how upcycling functions as both a sustainable practice and marketing tool (Ofori et al., 2025). These examples ground the theoretical discussion in industry practice.

The paper's critical examination of greenwashing and bluewashing represents important recognition that sustainability claims require scrutiny (Ofori et al., 2025). The discussion of regulatory responses, including EU proposals and specific case examples (Adidas, H&M, Zara), demonstrates awareness that marketing sustainability claims can mask inadequate practices.

The paper acknowledges using a "general literature review using the random analysis approach" but provides insufficient detail about search strategies, inclusion/exclusion criteria, or data analysis methods (Ofori et al., 2025). The authors correctly identify publication bias as a limitation, positive findings about upcycling are more likely published than negative or inconclusive results, yet the review doesn't adequately address how this bias may skew their conclusions (Ofori et al., 2025).

A fundamental conceptual problem pervades the paper: the focus on upcycling as a "marketing tool" is potentially problematic when not clearly distinguished from upcycling as a genuine sustainability practice. While the paper mentions greenwashing, it doesn't sufficiently interrogate whether the strategic marketing angle reinforces the very problem it criticizes (Ofori et al., 2025). The paper notes that upcycling "provides fashion brands, including blue and green washers with a powerful tool," yet doesn't adequately resolve whether this facilitates greenwashing.

The paper cites a single statistic indicating that "54% of people have upcycled or recycled their clothing within the past year," but provides no rigorous data on whether upcycled products genuinely reduce total consumption, or if they primarily appeal to a niche market while mass consumption continues (Ofori et al., 2025). Critical questions remain unanswered: Does upcycling reduce overall fashion industry waste, or does it represent a small fraction of total production?

While the authors acknowledge that upcycling involves "labour-intensive process" with high costs for "processing, cleaning and sourcing waste materials," and note the challenge of "irregular supply of waste fashion materials," these operational constraints are mentioned but not deeply analyzed (Ofori et al., 2025). The scalability problem, central to whether upcycling can genuinely address industry-wide sustainability, receives only cursory treatment.

Despite the paper's focus on upcycling as a marketing strategy, it lacks depth in analyzing actual consumer behavior, motivations, and purchasing patterns (Ofori et al., 2025). A single study on the Indonesian brand "Kawan" is cited as evidence of poor social media engagement, but broader, rigorous data on consumer perception and adoption barriers is absent. The paper identifies consumer education as important but doesn't examine whether current marketing strategies actually achieve meaningful consciousness-raising or merely create a marketing veneer.

The paper heavily invokes circular economy (CE) principles without adequately questioning whether upcycling truly achieves circularity at scale, or whether it represents a partial, boutique solution (Ofori et al., 2025). The paper doesn't discuss potential rebound effects: if upcycling marketing successfully attracts consumers, does this offset environmental gains if those consumers continue purchasing new fast fashion alongside upcycled items?

While the paper mentions job creation and community empowerment, it provides minimal evidence of genuine social benefit or critical analysis of labor conditions in upcycling operations (Ofori et al., 2025). The discussion of workers' rights and fair compensation is absent, despite the paper's emphasis on upcycling's sociocultural advantages.

The reference list includes significant reliance on blog posts, corporate websites (Tonlé, Missoma), and unpublished theses rather than peer-reviewed research. While some grey literature is appropriate in a review, the heavy weighting toward industry sources and practitioner material weakens the evidence base.

There are some issues of claim verification as follow: The claim that "90-95% of energy is saved from the activities of upcycled clothing" is cited to a single source that appears to be a blog post, not a peer-reviewed study (Ofori et al., 2025). This figure requires independent verification and methodological transparency. The assertion about Renewcell and H&M's "equivalent of saving 50 million T-shirts" needs clearer explanation of what "equivalent" means, is this a displacement calculation, or an actual reduction in virgin fiber production?

There are some missing perspectives as follow: no discussion of rebound effects in fast fashion, limited engagement with textile science literature on fiber degradation and secondary material properties, absence of voices from textile workers, particularly in Global South production contexts, no critical examination of whether luxury/premium upcycled products maintain exclusionary pricing that contradicts sustainability goals.

For improvement, we provide some recommendations as follow: conduct systematic review protocols; use explicit PRISMA guidelines or equivalent to increase methodological rigor, distinguish marketing from sustainability; create clear analytical frameworks separating genuine environmental/social impact from marketing performance, incorporate quantitative lifecycle analysis; compare environmental footprints of upcycled vs. conventional production with peer-reviewed data. Further, we recommend to examine rebound effects; analyze whether upcycling markets displace virgin material production or supplement existing consumption, include critical stakeholder perspectives; Integrate voices from workers, marginalized communities, and independent sustainability auditors, and address scalability realistically; quantify the maximum potential of upcycling relative to total industry production and waste volumes.

CONCLUSION

This paper makes a valuable contribution to fashion sustainability discourse by synthesizing upcycling practices, marketing strategies, and greenwashing concerns within a single framework. However, it operates more as an industry-friendly overview than a critical scholarly analysis. The paper's central limitation is insufficient interrogation of whether upcycling as a "strategic marketing tool" genuinely advances sustainability or primarily serves brand differentiation for affluent consumers while the broader fast-fashion system remains largely unchanged. The authors acknowledge that "upcycling improves material efficiency, slows material flows and minimizes the demand for new goods," yet provide insufficient evidence that this occurs at meaningful scale. The work would be substantially strengthened by more rigorous methodology, deeper engagement with contradictions inherent in marketing-driven sustainability, and honest acknowledgment of upcycling's current limitations as an industry-wide solution

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