

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and fast fashion companies' practices: An exploration of company disclosures and media reports



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Background: The global fast fashion industry is known to be a prominent contributor to sustainability challenges which the United Nations seeks to address through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Sustainability disclosures remain largely voluntary and applicable to listed companies. A balanced assessment of the alignment to SDGs therefore necessitates the inclusion of independently reported sustainability information.

Aim: This study explores which SDGs are disclosed in fast fashion companies' corporate reports and determines the extent to which independently reported information corroborates or contradicts SDGs.

Setting: The study employed a content analysis of corporate and other reports from eight of the largest global fast fashion companies.

Method: Scores were calculated for each company, for each of the 17 SDGs over the 3-year period of 2020–2022.

Results: Although SDGs are frequently mentioned in the corporate reports, detailed disclosures relating to specific targets and specific initiatives are lacking. We find a misalignment between the SDG focus in corporate reports and in media reports. Media reports tend to provide a more balanced perspective, addressing both positive and negative impacts of the industry's practices on the SDGs. Coverage of specific sustainability transgressions by these reports makes them a relevant source of information that is not discussed in corporate reports.

Conclusion: Overall, the authors found a misalignment between SDG focus in corporate reports and the SDGs which attract media attention.

Contribution: The authors relate the SDGs to the fast fashion industry, which is notable because of the established significance of the industry in the attainment of these goals. Furthermore, our focus beyond self-reported disclosures contributes to the research on the relevance of corporate sustainability disclosures.

Keywords: fast fashion; United Nations Sustainable Development Goals; media reports; sustainability disclosures; sustainability initiative.

Introduction

Fast fashion refers to a business model in the clothing industry which is characterised by rapid design, production and distribution of low-cost clothing, replicating current fashion trends (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst 2010). Notably, the term 'fast' refers to the rapid pace at which clothing designs are transferred from the catwalk at fashion shows to retail stores, available for consumption (Bick, Halsey & Ekenga 2018). While the short production cycles in the industry promote accessibility and affordability of popular styles of clothing, they are associated with high levels of resource consumption and supply chain opacity. This model's reliance on speed and disposability has begun to exemplify a society that prioritises short-term gratification over sustainable, valuable creation (Bläse et al. 2024; Nayak et al. 2022).

Although contributing remarkably to the world's production output, the fast fashion industry remains one of the largest polluters in the world, generating 21 billion tonnes of waste annually (Thakker & Sun 2023). As this industry makes approximately half of the fashion industry's emissions output, it has been promulgated that the sector should be addressed to make significant improvements in its sustainability practices (Bick et al. 2018). In September 2015, the UN General

Assembly's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by United Nations Member States. It comprises a plan to address key global sustainability issues by outlining 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations 2016). Figure 1 presents the 17 SDGs.

This need for commitment to the SDGs is evidenced by numerous social pressures that are compelling fast fashion companies to accelerate their search for sustainable solutions. This trend is emerging on account of large commercial footprint, well-known brands, media visibility, and reliance of fast fashion companies on institutional investors based in developed countries. Regulators, investors and even consumers are increasingly scrutinising sustainability claims and requesting detailed corporate disclosures on environmental and social initiatives (Garcia-Torres, Rey-Garcia & Albareda-Vivo 2017). Resultantly, fast fashion companies are under greater pressure to adopt sustainable practices and demonstrate their visibility and verifiability using a cohesive set of sustainability priorities (Thakker & Sun 2023; Vijayarasa & Liu 2022).

The SDGs, a set of interconnected goals that promote environmental sustainability, social equality and economic security globally, provide a framework for responsible action across supply chains, production processes, labour conditions and equality initiatives (United Nations 2016). Fast fashion companies often face criticism for driving over-consumption, adopting unethical labour practices and causing environmental damage (James 2022; Taplin 2014; Thakker & Sun 2023; Vijayarasa & Liu 2022). The SDGs should be used to provide a comprehensive framework to support transformational change to address these challenges (Rosati & Faria 2019). In practice, goals such as SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and

Infrastructure), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Change), and SDG17 (Partnerships) are directly applicable to potential reform required in the fast fashion industry.

Despite an increase in scrutiny by stakeholders, gaps still persist in the regulatory reporting of how companies are addressing major sustainability challenges. For example, Garcia-Torres et al. (2017) reported that disclosures by some of the world's largest fast fashion companies lacked action-orientation. In response, the authors suggest the creation of a framework or setting corporate boundaries that are geared towards broad value creation efforts. In their study on sustainability in the fast fashion industry, Garcia-Torres et al. (2017) use the SDGs as a framework to enable a complete analysis of the disclosure of major global sustainability challenges because the majority of the companies are free to make any disclosures in their corporate reports. Because of the interconnectivity of the SDGs and their comprehensive coverage of global sustainability challenges, SDGs provide an ideal framework within which social and environmental concerns can be integrated into companies' operations and strategies (Rosati & Faria 2019).

While companies may publicly commit to adherence to certain SDGs in their self-reported disclosures, allegations of 'greenwashing' or 'SDG washing' question the adequacy of these disclosures (Dhanjee 2024). The ever-present phenomenon of greenwashing in fast fashion companies' practices and policies, particularly exposed by media reports, demonstrates the lack of progress being made towards addressing environmental and social issues as corporate profits continue to soar (Nayak et al. 2022). In this regard, Bick et al. (2018) cite the example of companies marketing their products as 'green' without adhering to any specific



Source: United Nations, 2016, *The sustainable development goals report*, United Nations, New York, viewed 16 March 2026, from <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2016/>

FIGURE 1: United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

environmental criterion. Greenwashing is so rampant that Thakker and Sun (2023) call for imposing penalties on companies for false sustainability claims. This problem highlights the need for a more in-depth investigation into whether fast fashion companies are genuinely committed to sustainable value creation.

Hence, the current study aimed to explore how the sustainability practices of fast fashion companies align with the SDGs. Because of the prevalence of greenwashing and the non-mandatory nature of many sustainability disclosures, the present analysis examines not only self-reported disclosures of company sustainability initiatives but also independent reports relating to companies' sustainability practices.

Media reports on companies' sustainability practices are especially relevant because of the largely voluntary and narrative nature of corporate sustainability reports. Siano et al. (2017) used a content analysis of 1151 newspaper headlines to elucidate how the media identified greenwashing by companies during Volkswagen's Dieselgate scandal of 2015. Similarly, Mobus (2012) analysed news reports published soon after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico to determine whether the sustainability reports of British Petroleum (BP Plc.) aligned with the media evidence. These studies reveal ample evidence of greenwashing in corporate reports.

The present study's focus on the fast fashion industry offers a valuable contextual contribution, given the industry's reputation for significant environmental degradation and exploitative labour practices (Nayak et al. 2022; Vijayarasa & Liu 2022). This contextual contribution is especially evident in the study's use of prior evidence to provide a coherent view of the applicability of each SDG to fast fashion companies' strategies and operations. Beyond extending research on how companies report on their sustainability practices (Herbert & Graham 2022; Rosati & Faria 2019), this study makes a noteworthy contribution to corporate reporting literature by exploring the extent to which these reports align with those of reputable media sources.

Literature review

Theoretical underpinnings

Because of the separation of ownership and management (Meckling & Jensen 1976), companies need to furnish information to stakeholders (Freeman 1984) to reduce information asymmetry (Akerlof 1970). Corporate reports have since evolved to include sustainability information. Stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory and institutional theory have underpinned research on sustainability reporting (Lakhani & Herbert 2022; Taslima, Baker & Davar 2025).

Stakeholder theory (Donaldson & Preston 1995; Freeman 1984) is an expected choice of theoretical lens because it defines stakeholders more broadly than providers of financial capital. Corporate reports must therefore provide requisite

information about firms' environmental and social impacts. Stakeholder theory is relevant to the present study, given the role of the fast fashion industry in global environmental and social challenges (Bick et al. 2018; Thakker & Sun 2023).

Legitimacy theory is becoming increasingly prominent because of companies' likely use of sustainability reporting to enhance their legitimacy (Deegan 2007; Tilling & Tilt 2010). Recently, Herbert and Graham (2022) used legitimacy theory as a theoretical lens for their analysis of sustainability information by corporates and reported that firms operating in environmentally sensitive industries make more extensive sustainability disclosures. This finding aligns with legitimacy theory – organisations that face greater public scrutiny are likely to provide more disclosure to justify their actions.

Our incorporation of media reports amid greenwashing in corporate reports needs to consider theoretical underpinnings in this specific context. Janik and Ryoszko (2023) overviewed main theories used in research on greenwashing in the context of sustainability. Legitimacy theory dominates the research as firms adopt and report on sustainability initiatives to maintain legitimacy in society. Although both stakeholder theory and institutional theory are relevant to the present study and considered in our analysis, legitimacy theory forms our primary theoretical base.

The UN SDGs have been used as a framework for this study, given the direction they provide in the pursuit of sustainable value creation (Bebbington & Unerman 2018) and their comprehensive coverage of major global sustainability challenges (Garcia-Torres et al. 2017; Rosati & Faria 2019). This is consistent with the suggestions of Abeysekera (2022), who suggests using the SDGs as 'goal posts' in a framework of principle-based sustainability reports. Overall, each of the 17 SDGs addresses an important and distinct aspect of environmental sustainability. Despite the difference in their foci, a reporting framework that incorporates the SDGs can show the interconnection between financial and other capitals (Abeysekera 2022), as many pairs or groups of SDGs have been correlated to each other (Pakkan et al. 2023). This connectivity aligns with the research on integrated thinking, where companies are expected to consider the relationships between various types of capital in their operations (Dimes & De Villiers 2025).

Reporting of Sustainable Development Goals

Organisations are expected to assess, monitor and report on their contributions to SDGs. Following the precedent of Rosati and Faria (2019), this study defines SDG reporting as the practice of providing information about how the company addresses the SDGs in publicly available corporate reports. Bebbington and Unerman (2018) suggested that organisations should outline how their strategies, business models, programmes and initiatives align with relevant SDGs and associated targets. Garcia-Torres et al. (2017) provide empirical evidence that strengthens the relevance of the SDGs to the fast fashion industry. Their study identifies SDGs

impacted by issues that are important to the fast fashion industry (classified as 'common materiality issues'). The study's analysis mapped each sustainability issue identified by each company in the sample to at least one SDG. Based primarily on these findings, the authors conclude that the SDGs are an appropriate, universal framework for sustainability disclosure among fast fashion companies.

Although SDGs remain pertinent to sustainability challenges in the fast fashion industry, prior research has reached varying conclusions on whether SDG reporting has provided a meaningful and/or accurate depiction of companies' sustainability objectives. The empirical evidence from Garcia-Meca and Martinez-Ferrero (2021) revealed that SDG reporting had no significant impact on firm performance measured as Tobin's Q. Similarly, the findings of a lack of consistency in SDG reporting (Del Río et al. 2024) suggest that companies tend to report on those SDGs that create a favourable impression of their commitment to the SDGs.

The scepticism around the value of sustainability reporting is corroborated by the findings of Arvidsson and Dumay (2022) who observed that despite improvement in the quality of sustainability disclosures among companies, their performance with regard to sustainability objectives had plateaued. These findings prompted the call by the authors for enhanced efforts towards ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) performance instead of ESG reporting.

Greenwashing

The term 'greenwashing' was first used in 1986 by an environmental activist, Jay Westerveld, who criticised hotels for encouraging their guests to reuse towels under the pretext of conserving water, while the hotels themselves failed to implement broader environmental initiatives with more meaningful impact (De Freitas Netto et al. 2020). Greenwashing is therefore the practice of a company misleading stakeholders on its commitment to sustainability goals. Mobus (2012) explains the problematically vague connection between private actions and public image. In this environment, a close comparison between actual performance and sustainability reporting is required.

In the context of corporate reporting, greenwashing is the practice of companies presenting their sustainability commitments in an overly positive manner, creating an impression of strong commitment, while in reality, their actions fall short (Mahoney et al. 2013). Lashitew (2021) furthers the narrative on greenwashing in the context of corporate reporting. He explains that since companies' sustainability reporting is done so largely voluntarily, with these reports not subject to external verification, there is the risk of companies exploiting the SDGs for greenwashing. These texts are created to fulfil the expectations of company stakeholders instead of being representative of meaningful actions (Siano et al. 2017). Similarly, Garcia-Meca and Martinez-Ferrero (2021), in their empirical analysis of the value relevance of SDG reporting, refer to camouflaging

firms, being firms that provide symbolic reporting of sustainable actions in order to create the impression that the firm is committed to addressing its social and environmental challenges. This reporting of only favourable information exacerbates information asymmetries and misleads stakeholders.

Siano et al. (2017) provide evidence of greenwashing done during the Volkswagen Dieselgate scandal. Semi-structured interviews with management revealed 'deceptive manipulation', which the authors classify as a form of greenwashing, in company-reported information. Consistent with legitimacy theory and in the context of the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, Mobus (2012) finds that the focus of sustainability reporting is driven by societal concerns about corporate activity.

The Sustainable Development Goals in relation to the fast fashion industry

The remainder of the literature review presents the SDGs as they relate to the fast fashion industry.

People (Sustainable Development Goal 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 16)

Several people-related SDGs have been identified as particularly relevant to the fast fashion industry. These are synthesised in Table 1 and discussed in detail in the literature review.

In the context of fast fashion garment production, rising consumer demands warrant a large labour force. Despite the increase in employment opportunities, garment workers have poor working conditions, limited bargaining power, and no mobility with their employment being informal and outsourced. Under these conditions, many garment workers are not unionised and thus lack formal protection. The result is a low-cost, flexible workforce that is exploited (Bick et al. 2018; Vijayarasa & Liu 2022).

With the rise in globalisation and growth of the global economy, international supply chains have become the norm, creating jobs in manufacturing nations where labour is cheaper. However, this trend may cause supply chains to become longer and less transparent. In order to keep garments inexpensive, cost-cutting measures should be intensified, further highlighting issues about ethical and sustainable practice (Nayak et al. 2022). For instance, in 2013, a clothing production facility in Bangladesh collapsed, killing 1127 workers (Taplin 2014). An evaluation of the structural and institutional factors contributing to this tragedy revealed that Western consumerism encourages a system that exploits international trade regimes (Taplin 2014). Similarly, Thakker and Sun (2023) reported that within the European Union (EU), consumption was concentrated in Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Poland, Belgium and Portugal, although manufacturing facilities were largely situated in Madagascar, Romania, India, China, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Characteristically, the workers in this system remain

TABLE 1: People-related Sustainable Development Goals and relevance to the fast fashion industry.

SDG	Relevance to the fast fashion industry	Example(s) of related studies
SDG 1: No Poverty; SDG 2: Zero Hunger	Limited bargaining power of fast fashion employees without regulated employment contracts.	Vijayarasa and Liu (2022)
SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being	Production facilities are often unsafe and unhygienic.	Taplin (2014)
SDG 4: Quality Education	Child labour is often used in fast fashion production facilities. In migrant households, children must be left in the care of relatives, who live far away.	Krause (2015), James (2022), Bläse et al. (2024)
SDG 5: Gender Equality	Young women are often employed in the fast fashion industry and are especially vulnerable to poor working conditions.	Vijayarasa and Liu (2022)
SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	Most assembly processes occur in developing nations, where cheaper labour can be found. Often, children are used as labourers in these production facilities. Labourers are exposed to health risks during the production process which uses polyester.	Nayak et al. (2022), Hobson (2013), James (2022), Bick et al. (2018)
SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities	Exploitation of desperate workers from poorer economies exacerbates social inequalities.	Taplin (2014), Thakker and Sun (2023)
SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	The women who work in production facilities are often migrants. The externalities in the supply chain of fast fashion have created an unjust, disproportionate burden on poorer communities.	Krause (2015), Bick et al. (2018)

Note: Please see the full reference list of the article Dhanjee, K., Sebastian, A. & Aucok, M., 2026, 'The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and fast fashion companies' practices: An exploration of company disclosures and media reports', *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences* 29(1), a6476. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajems.v29i1.6476>, for more information.

SDG, Sustainable development goal.

TABLE 2: Planet-related Sustainable Development Goals and relevance to the fast fashion industry.

SDG	Relevance to the fast fashion industry	Example(s) of related studies
SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation	The fast fashion production process pollutes water sources as it is largely petroleum-based. The industry makes use of materials that are water-intensive to produce or grow. Despite the imperative of having sustainable water and sanitation available for all, vulnerable individuals are forced to work in unhygienic and unsafe facilities.	Thakker and Sun (2023), Vijayarasa and Liu (2022), Bick et al. (2018)
SDG 13: Climate Action	Pollution of water sources and the generation of vast amounts of greenhouse gases.	Thakker and Sun (2023)
SDG 14: Life Below Water and SDG 15: Life on Land	The release of microfibres and dyes that harm marine life. Consumers are more likely to discard their used pieces of fast fashion clothing, as these would have been purchased at relatively lower prices. Discarded clothing ends up in landfills.	Thakker and Sun (2023), Bick et al. (2018)

Note: Please see the full reference list of the article, Dhanjee, K., Sebastian, A. & Aucok, M., 2026, 'The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and fast fashion companies' practices: An exploration of company disclosures and media reports', *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences* 29(1), a6476. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajems.v29i1.6476>, for more information.

SDG, Sustainable development goal.

underpaid and exposed to numerous issues such as child labour, low wages and health and safety hazards, resulting in unsafe workplace conditions (Hobson 2013; James 2022). Placing fast fashion labour issues within SDG 8 on Decent Work, Thakker and Sun (2023) note that labourers in the fast fashion industry are forced to work in extreme-risk garment manufacturing units, which often results in fatal accidents.

In a recent study, LeBaron et al. (2022) found that companies in the global garment supply chain failed to make any meaningful progress towards achieving their commitments to paying a living wage to their labourers. Breen (2020) observed that the industry exploits migrant workers as labourers by taking advantage of their limited proficiency in the native language, limited social connections, restricted rights, and dependency on employers. The occurrence of forced labour is closely linked to conditions of poverty, a scarcity of stable employment opportunities and education, as well as an inadequate legal system, rampant corruption, and an industry that relies on inexpensive labour (Dhanjee 2024; Thakker & Sun 2023; Williams 2022). Often, women garment workers in the fast fashion industry are migrants who have moved to industrial zones or export processing zones to work in factories (Krause 2015). The long hours of work in the fast fashion production facilities often necessitate the separation of parents from their children, who are then left in the care of their relatives who live far away. In this regard, one of the targets under SDG 5 tracks the proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, by sex, age

and location. By tracking this target, the impact can be measured, and progress can be made to reduce time spent on unpaid domestic care (Dhanjee 2024).

Another violation of the principles underlying the SDGs relates to the safety of women garment workers. Vijayarasa and Liu (2022) document the extent to which women workers travel to factories in developing countries, often on unlit streets, to and from work, facing the risk of harassment, theft, and forms of sexual violence. Williams (2022) highlights that subcontracting (that is, where a factory sends a worker to another factory without the knowledge of the buying fashion brand) is a challenge in supply chain transparency and increases exposure to exploitation of already un-unionised workers. Sustainable Development Goal 5 seeks a reduction in the number of women suffering various forms of violence – physical, sexual or psychological – by individuals other than their partners.

Factory owners are legally obliged to pay only the minimum wage and offer competitive prices, but factories may push workers harder than is the industry norm and implement unrealistic deadlines (Williams 2022). If workers fail to meet deadlines, they may suffer wage penalties (Vijayarasa & Liu 2022). Sustainable Development Goal 8 seeks to attain the full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men and people with disabilities. Ending poverty in all forms for everyone (SDG 1) includes achieving essential targets related to social security (Dhanjee 2024).

Planet (Sustainable Development Goal 6, 13, 14, 15)

The fast fashion industry is the second largest consumer of water and generates 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Thakker & Sun 2023). Not only are they very high consumers of water, but they also directly impact water supply by dumping untreated waste from dyeing processes into water sources (Thakker & Sun 2023). In addition to the harmful impact of production processes, whenever synthetic clothing items are subsequently washed, they release toxic microfibres into water systems. These microfibres are too small to be caught by treatment plants, thereby ending up in water sources, thus harming marine life. Indirectly, the industry's labour practices compel vulnerable individuals to work in situations where their access to clean water and sanitation is inhibited (Thakker & Sun 2023; Vijayarasa & Liu 2022).

Fundamental to the fast fashion model is the idea that garments are disposable, so discarded clothing often ends up in landfills, contributing to waste pollution. This, in turn, clogs rivers and greenways as rainwater transports waste into drainage systems. This pollution poses health hazards, especially in lower-income communities with inadequate waste management systems (Bick et al. 2018). The planet-related SDGs that are relevant to the fast fashion industry are detailed further in Table 2.

Financial profit (Sustainable Development Goal 12)

It is estimated that 80bn new clothing items are purchased annually, generating United States Dollar (USD) 1.2 trillion for the fashion industry as a whole (Bick et al. 2018). Fast fashion is synonymous with making trendy clothing accessible at lower prices. However, the low financial costs do not include the substantial human and environmental impact of the production process (Bick et al. 2018). The planet-related SDGs that are relevant to the fast fashion industry are detailed further in Table 2.

Sustainable Development Goal 12 relates to responsible consumption and production. Shorter production cycles cause fast fashion companies to deviate from this goal. Until the mid-20th century, the fashion industry catered for four seasons a year. Designers worked for many months ahead to plan for each season and predict the styles that they believed consumers would prefer. Before fashion became attainable to the masses, it belonged to high society. However, today fast fashion brands produce about 52 'micro-seasons' a year, or one new 'collection' every week (Meskini et al. 2024). The product life cycle of fashion products has decreased from months to weeks, or, in some cases, days (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood 2010). As a result of consumers becoming more aware of changing trends, even firms in the broader fashion industry have had to move to more responsive, demand-driven supply chains (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood 2010).

Bick et al. (2018) established that the potential ramifications to human and environmental well-being linked to affordable clothing may be concealed at various stages in the product life cycle of every garment. By compressing production cycles to offer lower prices, fast fashion companies have

enabled consumers to buy more garments, often treating them as disposable and thus discarding them after just a few times of wearing (Nayak et al. 2022). This increased garment consumption drives the production of inexpensive clothing, and prices are kept low by outsourcing production to low and middle-income countries (Bick et al. 2018; Dhanjee 2024).

Knowledge gap

Bebbington and Unerman (2018) emphasise the role of academic accounting to achieve SDGs. Notably, the authors contend that a focus on SDGs is the next phase of accounting research on sustainable development. Since their seminal work, several studies have focused on SDG reporting, with examples detailed in the rest of this section. However, some gaps remain in research that focuses specifically on SDGs in the fast fashion industry and in research that seeks to corroborate self-reported progress with other sources, such as media reports.

The objectives of the study from Garcia-Meca and Martinez-Ferrero (2021) are partially aligned with the present study. The former sought to contribute to the academic debate about the value relevance of SDG reporting, with the study notably incorporating the aspect of greenwashing in disclosures. However, the analysis was quantitative and used the measurement approximation of Tobin's Q of the same period in which the SDG reporting score was calculated. Given their focus on the creation of enduring value, SDG initiatives are more likely to contribute to firm performance value in the long run, which may not be captured using quantitative analysis. This notion of the future-orientation of sustainability initiatives is supported by Thelken and De Jong (2020) in their empirical evidence that self-transcending values significantly impact sustainable entrepreneurial intention.

In their qualitative study, Nayak et al. (2022) focus on fashion production companies in Vietnam. They call for future research that extends the geographical coverage and fashion retailers. Furthermore, Siano et al. (2017) call for research on greenwashing that extends beyond a single case, as in Nayak et al.'s (2022) study. The current research seeks to answer these calls by including large global fast fashion companies which are well known among retail shoppers.

With regard to incorporating media reports in the present analysis, we contribute to the existing literature that compares media reports to self-reported sustainability disclosures (Mobus 2012; Siano et al. 2017), with a notable focus on the environmentally and socially sensitive fast fashion industry.

Methods

A qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff 2018) was deemed necessary to capture topics relating to sustainability in company and media reports. Using the SDGs as categories, we consider the details disclosed or reported regarding each sustainability topic. Similar to PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC)'s 2019 SDG challenge and a study conducted by Malola and Maroun (2019), this present study performed a thorough analysis of disclosures in different integrated

reports or sustainability reports and employed the same method to analyse the information provided in independent reports.

Data

The following reports were analysed in the current study:

- Publicly available sustainability reports of eight large, global fast fashion companies for the 3-year period of 2020–2022.
- Credible media reports and newspaper articles highlighting the sustainability issues within the industry from the same 3-year period.

There are several listed and unlisted fast fashion companies with a global presence. For this study, eight leading global fast fashion brands were selected based on the highest global revenue (Business of Fashion 2022). The Business of Fashion website (Business of Fashion 2022) contains a database of reports and insights into the fashion industry. Business of Fashion website database has also been used in other academic research relating to the fashion industry (Ben Hassen & Tremblay 2019; Sestino, Di Matteo & Amatulli 2023).

An industry report suggests that several companies may be classified as ‘fast’ fashion companies, as the market is rapidly expanding globally. However, the Business Research Company lists 31 ‘major’ companies operating in the fast fashion market (Kavali 2026). Seven of the eight companies shortlisted for the present research are major listed companies in the industry report. Company 7 was not included in the industry report, but has been included in our analysis as it is a well-known brand in the fast fashion industry (Zimand-Sheiner & Lissitsa 2024). We limited our sample size to eight to enable elaborate analysis of corporate reports and news sources, while maintaining adequate geographic representativeness (Wutich, Beresford & Bernard 2024). We anonymise the companies for the purposes of our analysis.

While it may have been preferable to base the sample selection on financial metrics such as market capitalisation, the unlisted status of certain fast fashion companies tends to be problematic. Company 7, being unlisted, is a well-known fast fashion company and has software applications that are among the most popular for retail consumers (Business of Fashion 2022).

Table 3 summarises the sample in terms of headquarters location and revenue. Collectively, the companies in our sample generated at least USD164bn in 2022. For comparison, the size of the global textile market was estimated at 1 trillion USD in 2021 (Meskini et al. 2024).

To form a database of information relating to the sample, the primary researcher searched for all publicly available annual reports from: (1) the eight companies in the sample, and (2) reports published for the fiscal years 2020, 2021, and 2022.

TABLE 3: Sample summary – Location and revenue.

Pseudonym	Headquarters (2022)	Reported revenue (2022)
Company 1	Japan	USD18.41bn
Company 2	United States	USD16.67bn
Company 3	Sweden	USD22.02bn
Company 4	Spain	USD32.09bn
Company 5	United States	USD15.69bn
Company 6	United States	USD9.155bn
Company 7	Singapore	Not officially reported – Unlisted
Company 8	United States	USD49.9bn

USD, United states dollar.

These fiscal years were selected as during this period, the fast fashion industry is stated to have experienced an online retail boom because consumers resorted to online shopping during social distancing regulations because of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Meskini et al. 2024). Except for company 7, all companies in the sample had published sustainability reports in addition to their annual financial results for each of the 3 years selected. For company 7, sustainability reports for 2021 and 2022 were available and used in the analysis (with averages calculated over 2 years instead of 3 years where necessary).

To ensure consistency, the primary researcher used media reports about fast fashion companies from five well-reputed, global news sources. Besides their reputation among readers, the news sources have also been used in prior academic research. In addition, the primary author paid subscription fees to access these news sources, enabling comprehensive coverage of news reports. These sources, presented in Table 4, were used consistently for all the eight companies in the sample. The year 2020 was used as a starting point and articles were tracked up to 2022, which coincides with the period of self-published information by the companies used. Overall, 4395 media reports were examined in relation to the eight companies in the sample, over the 3-year period.

Analysis

After an initial reading of the reports, the primary researcher chose to encompass sustainability themes driven by the SDGs. The subjectivity of coding was minimised through consulting with two experts, one from the fast fashion industry and another from the sustainability industry. Expert 1 is a research analyst and project manager with a specialisation in the fields of beauty, fashion, and other consumer industries operating within sub-Saharan Africa. Expert 2 is the head of the sustainability division at a multinational consulting firm.

The primary author completed initial coding for two companies during the pilot phase. The coding was then reperformed by the two experts for those same two companies. The researcher and experts compared the scores and coding in both rounds and discussed any discrepancies before the researcher proceeded with the main coding process.

Specifically, the researcher made data search using the following keywords. Notably, the search was done manually to consider the context of the search terms. After completing search, the researcher read the paragraphs surrounding the terms to obtain details on the extent of the disclosure and to ensure that the context was relevant to the study:

- Sustainable development goals (also Sustainable Development Goals)
- Sustainable development goal (also Sustainable Development Goal)
- SDG
- SDGs
- Target(s)
- Policy(ies)
- Sustainability
- 2030 Agenda
- 17 goals

Several differences in coding were resolved with the experts during the pilot phase of the research. Thereafter, the authors proceeded with the main coding. For the scoring, companies' policies from integrated reports and sustainability reports were allocated a score ranging from zero to two, as outlined in Table 5. Each company was assigned a default score of zero for each SDG. However, as soon as they mentioned the SDG or a company practice(s) related to the SDG, the researcher considered the details of the disclosure. A score of one was assigned after confirming the existence of a policy. A score of two was awarded if the specific company policy was associated with SDG targets. Therefore, the maximum score for each SDG depended on how many times a related practice or policy existed for that SDG. A similar scoring methodology was used in PwC's 2019 SDG challenge (PwC 2019).

In addition to the Company reports, media reports relating to sustainability issues were analysed for each company over the 3-year period. Media reports relevant to the SDGs were given a score of 1 or -1. The scoring was as follows:

- 1: The company has acted on its policies identified in its sustainability reports. This has been evidenced by media report(s).
- -1: The company has contravened its own policies, which were identified in its sustainability reports.

TABLE 4: Sources of media reports.

Media source	CEO or Editor	Use in prior academic research
Business of Fashion	Imran Amed, a prominent writer in the fashion industry, is the founder, CEO, and editor-in-chief of the Business of Fashion (Business of Fashion 2022).	Sestino et al. (2023), Ben Hassen and Tremblay (2019)
Financial Times	Matin Wolf and Gillian Tett. Tett previously chaired the Financial Times editorial board and co-founded the Financial Times sustainability newsletter (Financial Times 2026).	Curme et al. (2017), Stander (2024)
The New York Times	The New York Times employs professionals across various disciplines, including journalists, developers and strategists (The New York Times Company 2026).	Yu and Yang (2024)
TheIndustry.fashion	TheIndustry.fashion was founded by Lauretta Roberts and Antony Hawman. The founders each have more than 25 years of experience in the field having held senior roles in major market-leading businesses such as, Birchbox, Retail Week, Drapers and Management Today (TheIndustry.fashion 2026).	Venter (2024)
Vogue	Anna Wintour has been the Global Editorial Director since 1988 of American Vogue magazine (Vogue 2026).	Konig (2006)

Note: Please see the full reference list of the article, Dhanjee, K., Sebastian, A. & Aucock, M., 2026, 'The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and fast fashion companies' practices: An exploration of company disclosures and media reports', *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences* 29(1), a6476. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajems.v29i1.6476>, for more information.

CEO, Chief executive officer.

These media report scores were added to or deducted from the gross scores obtained using the self-reported information scores, as outlined in Table 5. For each sample company and each SDG, all positive scores and all negative scores were analysed. Thus, the researcher was able to assess true zeros and the zeros that arose from equal amounts of positive and negative scores.

The coding was done manually in an Excel workbook. As part of the coding process, the researcher created a separate Excel worksheet for each SDG. Each worksheet contained information relating to the disclosure by each company relating to that SDG. In addition, the coding of the media reports was done according to each SDG, by company, in separate Excel worksheets. This methodology enabled a thorough analysis of media reports by SDG, as presented in various tables in the Results Section of this study.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the School of Accountancy Ethics Committee, University of the Witwatersrand (No. WSOA 2022 11 19W).

Results and discussion

Figure 2 shows that many companies tend to focus their reporting efforts on specific SDGs that align closely with their business, rather than addressing all 17 SDGs. This suggests that companies in the sample could identify their key stakeholders (Freeman 1984) and are attempting to report information relevant to SDGs.

Corporate report analysis

Seven out of eight companies in the sample were listed on stock exchanges and their SDG disclosure frequencies differed. We infer that even for a listed entity, SDG disclosure varies.

TABLE 5: Scoring criteria: Self-reported information.

Score	Explanation
0	No mention is made of the SDG.
1	The SDG is mentioned, but no details regarding specific projects, initiatives or targets are provided.
2	The SDG is mentioned and discussed in detail, with information regarding specific projects, initiatives or targets.

SDG, Sustainable development goal.

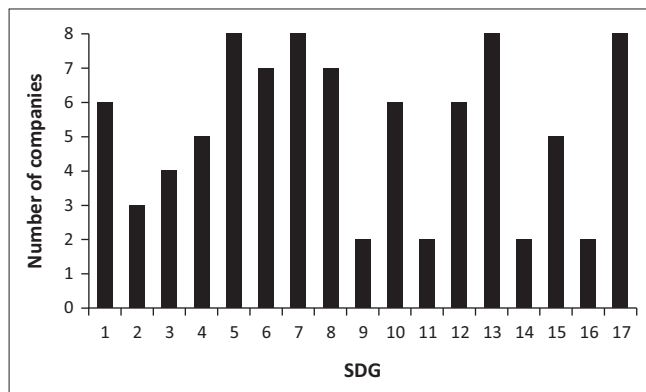
This finding highlights the voluntary nature of sustainability reporting (Van der Waal & Thijssens 2020) and affirms the variability in disclosures noted by Herbert and Graham (2022). However, this variability could also arise because of differences in reporting requirements along various exchanges, highlighting the need for alignment to global sustainability reporting standards (Bebbington & Unerman 2018).

Reiterating the variance in the voluntary reports, Table 6 shows that company 4 adopted slightly different approaches to reporting on their alignment with the SDGs and chose to highlight specific SDGs that it focused on through, 'key milestones'. These milestones likely represent its primary areas of sustainability emphasis. In this case, SDGs 3, 5, 8, 12, and 13 appeared to be the most critical, and company 4 tracked its progress towards achieving these five goals. Other SDGs are mentioned as, 'notable mentions', which suggests they may not be the primary focus, but the companies might still consider reporting on them. This approach continues to highlight the voluntary nature of sustainability reporting, which has been noted in prior research (Van der Waal & Thijssens 2020) and is notable considering the focus on

legitimacy theory in prior literature (Herbert & Graham 2022; Janik & Ryoszko 2023).

Every company in the sample made references in their disclosures from 2020 to 2022 to SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy). This suggests that fast fashion companies recognise the impact of their operations on both the environment and people and provide necessary disclosures to explain their actions (Herbert & Graham 2022). Vijayarasa and Liu (2022) elucidated that women play a significant role in the fast fashion industry, as reflected in the prioritisation of SDG 5 in their disclosures, which supports stakeholder theory (Freeman 1984).

Company 3 also furnished information on whether each goal was achieved through its direct actions, indirect strategies or contributions through partnerships. This disclosure aligned with the findings of Silva (2021), who noted that companies address the SDGs and legitimise their contributions by mapping different SDGs to existing activities and future endeavours, either for their core business (direct strategies by company 3) or sustainability as an enhancement (indirect strategies noted by company 3). When company 3 attained a goal through a direct strategy, it explicitly identified the specific strategy used. This approach suggests that company 3 addressed a wider range of sustainability goals and might engage in partnerships to work towards the attainment of the SDGs. This level of detail in reporting can provide stakeholders with a better understanding of the company's sustainability efforts and show how they are directly addressing specific SDGs, as suggested by Arvidsson and Dumay (2022).



SDG, Sustainable development goal.

FIGURE 2: Coverage of Sustainable Development Goals in corporate reports.

TABLE 6: Computed scores: Self-reported information.

SDG	Company							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1: No poverty	14	29	64	29	0	14	29	0
2: Zero hunger	0	0	7	57	0	0	0	14
3: Good health & well-being	3	0	15	31	0	8	0	0
4: Quality education	3	0	20	65	0	10	0	0
5: Gender equality	6	11	78	67	22	28	22	22
6: Clean water & sanitation	8	25	63	38	19	50	13	0
7: Affordable & clean energy	6	20	70	40	20	40	10	20
8: Decent work & economic growth	2	21	21	24	17	18	4	0
9: Industry, innovation & infrastructure	0	0	50	19	0	0	0	0
10: Reduced inequalities	2	5	35	25	10	20	0	0
11: Sustainable cities & communities	0	10	10	20	5	0	0	0
12: Responsible consumption and production	3	0	35	22	45	33	6	0
13: Climate action	13	13	0	25	13	0	13	25
14: Life below water	0	0	38	10	0	0	0	0
15: Life on land	9	0	29	5	0	0	5	0
16: Peace, justice & strong institutions	0	0	21	13	4	0	0	0
17: Partnerships for the goals	0	0	8	11	21	3	3	5

SDG, Sustainable developmental goal.

Media report analysis

All media sources published articles relating to the SDGs in some or other way, although the focus of the media attention is not primarily on sustainability practices. Table 7 shows the dispersion of SDG coverage across the media reports.

Sustainable Development Goal 12 relates to responsible production. The media focus was on the production processes and dumping of toxic waste. Considering the relationship with other SDGs, reports on SDG 12 could have also been coded as relating to SDG 13, 14, or 15. For the present study, they were coded as SDG 12 as they focused on the production processes.

The extensively covered Rana Plaza incident in Bangladesh and its subsequent impacts on women were predominantly presented in the context of SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). Several articles across all media sources referenced the incident, the pact formed subsequent to the incident and the extension of the pact. This may suggest that social issues, particularly concerning workers' rights and well-being, are important to the media.

TABLE 7: Summary of media reports published per Sustainable Development Goal.

SDG	Favourable	Unfavourable
1: No poverty	3	8
2: Zero hunger	0	0
3: Good health & well-being	5	1
4: Quality education	0	0
5: Gender equality	3	2
6: Clean water & sanitation	0	0
7: Affordable & clean energy	2	0
8: Decent work & economic growth	20	57
9: Industry, innovation & infrastructure	9	1
10: Reduced inequalities	7	4
11: Sustainable cities & communities	0	0
12: Responsible consumption & production	48	28
13: Climate action	10	13
14: Life below water	2	1
15: Life on land	4	1
16: Peace, justice & strong institutions	4	2
17: Partnerships for the goals	13	8

SDG, Sustainable development goal.

TABLE 8: Summary of media reports published per company.

SDG	Company								Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1: No poverty	1	0	3	0	0	0	-8	0	12
2: Zero hunger	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
3: Good health & well-being	0	0	-1	0	0	0	-1	2	4
4: Quality education	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5: Gender equality	0	0	-1	-2	0	0	0	4	7
6: Clean water & sanitation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7: Affordable & clean energy	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	4
8: Decent work & economic growth	-2	-2	-4	-2	0	-5	-5	0	20
9: Industry, innovation & infrastructure	0	0	0	-1	0	0	0	0	1
10: Reduced inequalities	0	0	-1	0	0	0	0	0	1
11: Sustainable cities & communities	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
12: Responsible consumption and production	5	0	-1	-1	2	4	-3	0	16
13: Climate action	0	0	-1	0	0	-2	-6	2	11
14: Life below water	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
15: Life on land	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
16: Peace, justice & strong institutions	-1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
17: Partnerships for the goals	-3	0	0	0	0	2	-2	2	12

SDG, Sustainable development goal.

Table 7 further indicates that where fast fashion companies attract media attention, this media attention is unbiased, as the results show a relatively even split between positive and negative reports. Although we note overall the skew towards positive reports in general in the industry, the negative reports focus on matters that remained overlooked in the self-reported disclosures. For example, SDG 8 had the highest number of negative media reports, although the same SDG did not rank among the most disclosed, per the results in Table 7.

Further comparison of the media reports to sustainability disclosures revealed a misalignment in the focus on SDGs. Even though company 7 did not include SDG 3, which relates to 'good health and well-being' in its sustainability report, Business of Fashion reported that hazardous chemicals were discovered in company 7 products, impacting the aspect of good health and well-being.

In a more detailed analysis, media reports which were specific to the eight companies in the sample were classified by SDG. Table 8 demonstrates results of the analysis of media reports relating to the sample companies. Favourable reports are presented as positive numbers and unfavourable reports are presented as negative numbers. A comparison of media reports and company reports on each SDG is presented in Table 9.

Companies 6 and 7 garnered negative media attention regarding SDG 8. For these companies, reports covered the infringement of worker rights in Myanmar and forced labour in Xinjiang. There were also negative reports for companies 3 and 4 regarding SDG 8. Yet, company 3 and company 4 provided positive disclosures surrounding SDG 8 in company reports.

The companies in our sample provided extensive disclosure on social and governance-oriented SDGs such as SDGs 1, 5, 6 and 7. However, the relatively low media coverage of these aspects reveals that these issues are not the subject of public or media scrutiny. A detailed review of the results in Table 8

TABLE 9: Comparison of company disclosures to media reports.

SDG	Company reports	Media reports	Percentage difference
1: No poverty	179	12	93
2: Zero hunger	78	2	97
3: Good health & well-being	57	4	93
4: Quality education	98	0	100
5: Gender equality	256	7	97
6: Clean water & sanitation	216	0	100
7: Affordable & clean energy	226	4	98
8: Decent work & economic growth	107	20	81
9: Industry, innovation & infrastructure	69	1	99
10: Reduced inequalities	97	1	99
11: Sustainable cities & communities	45	0	100
12: Responsible consumption and production	144	16	89
13: Climate action	102	11	89
14: Life below water	48	0	100
15: Life on land	48	1	98
16: Peace, justice & strong institutions	38	1	97
17: Partnerships for the goals	51	12	76

SDG, Sustainable development goal.

suggests that the media attention devoted to these SDGs for the companies in our sample, was generally positive.

Notably, no media reports were found for several SDGs such as SDG4, SDG6, SDG11, and SDG14. This is despite extensive corporate reporting. The discrepancy suggests that some SDGs may be incorporated in company reports to establish organisation legitimacy rather than in response to stakeholder requirements.

Moreover, SDGs that are more directly linked to the fast fashion industry (SDG 8, 12, 13, and 17) showed relatively lower percentage differences. This suggests that when sustainability issues are directly relevant to the industry, they are reported in media although not emphasised with similar strength in corporate reports (based on results in Table 6).

Conclusion

The objective of the current study is to explore the manner in which different sustainability practices of fast fashion companies align with the SDGs. This analysis extended beyond corporate reports to include credible media reports relating to companies' sustainability practices. Overall, we find a misalignment between the SDG focus in corporate reports and the SDGs which attract media attention. The timely focus of media reports of incidents of human rights and polluting activities makes the media reports an essential moderator of the positive focus of self-reported disclosures.

We highlight the notable proclivity for greenwashing, particularly in relation to SDG 8, SDG 12, SDG 13, and SDG 17, as evidenced by the discrepancies between corporate disclosures and media reports of the selected companies. In contrast, SDGs that are less directly impacted by the fast fashion industry (SDGs 4, 6, 11, and 14) did not garner much media attention, despite being disclosed in corporate reports, which may suggest greenwashing. The frequently disclosed

SDGs were not always the ones that attracted the most media attention relative to the other SDGs, perhaps because of a lack of verifiability by the media.

The findings of the present study lay the groundwork for future research with a more targeted focus on greenwashing in the fast fashion industry. Moreover, the identified mismatch between corporate reports and media reports is particularly significant in the context of voluntary sustainability reporting. While SDG 12 emphasises responsible *production* and *consumption*, the current research focuses on responsible production, leaving a gap in the literature concerning consumer choices and factors influencing them. We suggest conducting further research on consumer sentiments and alignment with corporate sentiments, which may offer valuable insights for unlocking sustainability synergies.

Despite a large number of media reports on the fast fashion industry, relatively few reports focused on goals specific to the companies chosen in our sample over the time period of our analysis. Further research, which expands the number of companies and focuses more specifically on media reports, would extend the present analysis. In this regard, research may extend to the development of sentiment indices based on sustainability issues and SDGs reported in the media.

The inclusion of media reports marks a notable deviation from the existing corporate reporting literature. However, this study has one limitation as it does not include input from experts in media communication. Future research may seek to delve into further detailed comparisons of media sources to self-reported sustainability reports. Ideally, experts in media coverage would lend further credibility to such research, given the scope for interdisciplinary research.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Kamini Dhanjee: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft. Avani Sebastian: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Michele Aucock: Conceptualisation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The authors declare that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

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