

How did H&M use in-store recycling and ‘Conscious’ collections to balance fast fashion with sustainability promises?

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. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Fashion firms have adopted sustainable techniques to reduce their environmental impact and gain a competitive edge. Sustainable fast fashion can mitigate the negative environmental and social repercussions of traditional quick fashion (Oliveira et al., 2022). In 2024, H&M increased the percentage of recycled materials in its products to 29.5% and aims to double this by 2030 (H&M, 2025).

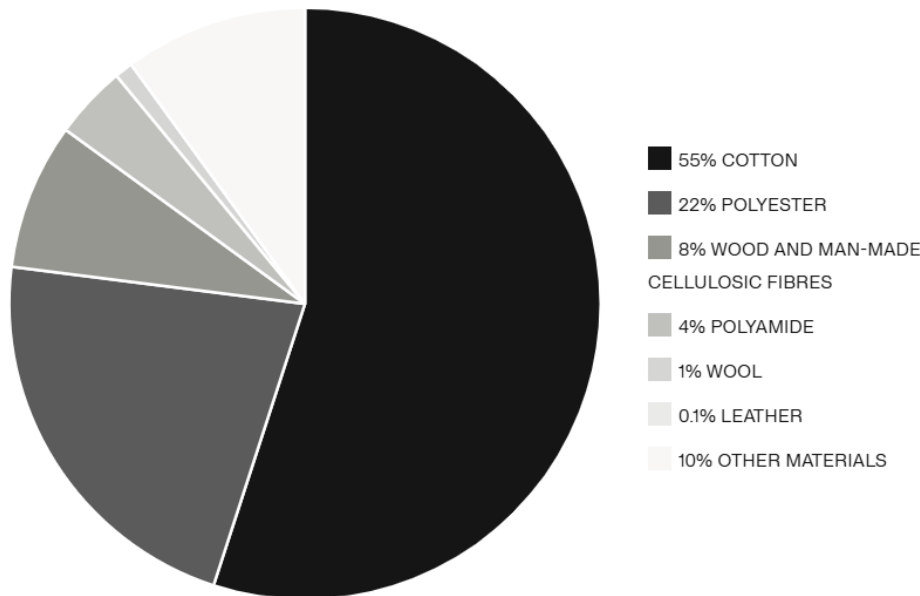


Figure 1: Materials used in H&M
(Source: H&M, 2025)

1.2 Research Aim

The research aims to investigate how H&M utilises in-store recycling and conscious collection, focusing on green marketing, CSR, and sustainable branding to balance a sustainable fast fashion approach.

1.3 Research objectives

- To examine how H&M integrates green marketing and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, such as in-store recycling and the ‘Conscious’ collections, into its sustainability narrative.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of H&M’s sustainable branding strategies in enhancing consumer perception and loyalty within the fast fashion industry.
- To critically assess whether H&M’s sustainability efforts represent a genuine strategic shift or serve primarily as a public relations tool to address environmental criticism.

1.4 Research question

1. How does H&M implement green marketing and CSR initiatives, such as in-recycling and ‘Conscious’ collection, in its sustainability practice?
2. What are the benefits of the sustainable branding strategy of H&M in improving customer perception and loyalty in the fast fashion sector?
3. Do H&M’s sustainability efforts present a genuine strategic shift, or are they primarily a public relations tool to address environmental criticism?

1.5 Problem statement / Rationale of the research

Most fast fashion products are produced using cheap, low-value polyester made from petroleum products, which is durable for a short time but hardly recyclable. Thus, even in the case of a brand implementing recycling, renting, and reselling initiatives, they will not be utilised to the full extent (Wren, 2022). Rationale of the current research, including meeting the growing demands of the customers for sustainable fast fashion options from renowned brands like H&M. Among the surveyed fast fashion retailers in Europe, H&M had the largest percentage of sustainable collections in their clothes lines in the first quarter of 2021, with nearly 25 per cent (Statista, 2025).

1.6 Significance

The current study is highly significant in providing readers with detailed knowledge about sustainability in fast fashion practice through green marketing, in-store recycling, ‘Conscious’ collections, and CSR initiatives. The study is also important for fashion companies and sustainable marketers to gain knowledge about the practical application of green marketing and other CSR initiatives, as seen in businesses like H&M, to achieve success.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Green marketing

Green marketing is considered a tool to promote the marketing of products or services whose primary motive is to protect the environment from harm caused by social, political, and economic factors. According to Panca et al. (2023), green marketing presents significant potential to cut the environmental issues caused by society, politics and the economy. In addition, it can also be used to promote responsible ethics among individuals and corporate firms towards care and protection. Additionally, green marketing is a common practice employed by the fashion industry to meet the increasing consumer sensitivity to environmental issues (Heidenstrøm, 2025). The fashion world exploits green marketing heavily to respond to the rising trend of consumer sensitivities to the negative environmental impacts of fashion, which has also led to greenwashing

2.2 CSR

Sustainability intersects with the concept of CSR, which is responsible for promoting ethical, socially, and environmentally responsible development in apparel production, in line with judicial and ethical norms, the fair treatment of the labour force, and the avoidance of harmful environmental and social processes within the scope of organisational activities (Singh, 2024). With the rise of customer consciousness, a social and sustainable orientation in fast fashion is becoming a popular practice (Baena, 2024). A move towards fulfilling a company's requirements as part of its CSR and sustainability efforts is a key aspect of the relevant management approach.

2.3 Sustainable branding

In the fast fashion world, sustainable branding is the combination of a long-term view of brand image development and consumer trust, with the consideration of environmental and social responsibility in business policy and marketing. A positive correlation has been observed between green brand image and consumer purchase intentions that the marketers of clothing and textile industries strategically need to focus on the promotion of altruistic attributes whenever they are trying to be sustainable and to emphasise the significance of ecological consciousness in influencing consumer behaviour in the fast fashion sector (Javed et al., 2024). The

strategy will enhance green satisfaction and green brand equity, ultimately leading to increased green purchase intentions.

2.4 Discussion of green marketing and CSR initiatives in-store recycling and ‘Conscious’ collection in the fashion industry

Green marketing and corporate social responsibility (CSR) are significant to the fashion industry, particularly in framing sustainability messages. Some fashion brands have launched products using materials such as organic cotton, recycled polyester, or sustainably sourced materials to minimise their environmental footprint and address concerns about their appeal to environmentally conscious customers. In the early 2010s, recycling programs were launched globally, allowing consumers to recycle unwanted textiles of any brand or condition through in-store recycling programs (H&M Group, 2025). These recycling programs typically work with external sorting and recycling companies that determine what garments are sorted for resale, reuse, or recycling. No reusable items would be sent to landfills, with energy from waste prioritised for non-reuse. CSR strategies based on this strategy focus on promoting circular fashion and product life cycles, rather than landfill space (Businessner, 2023). These strategies are often marketed to younger generations (especially Gen Z or Millennials) who also prefer sustainability as a criterion in their purchasing considerations, and are promoted through green marketing. The success of CSR strategies and green marketing will rely on transparency, measurable impact, and long-term environmental impact.

2.5 Evaluation of the effectiveness of sustainable branding to improve consumer perception and loyalty in the fashion sector

Sustainable branding is also effective in enhancing consumer perception and loyalty in the fashion market. Aligning brand and consumer values with environmental and ethical elements ultimately builds trust and emotional connection with consumers. Eighty-seven per cent of consumers believe that eco-conscious initiatives, such as ethical sourcing, transparency in supply chains, and circular fashion practices, positively impact brand image and influence purchasing decisions (SAP BrandVoice, 2024). Gen Z and Millennials are better at separating purchases based on authentic promises. Furthermore, the availability of crowd-sourced content heightens the impact of transparency and inconsistency; numerous studies demonstrate that consumers disengage with a brand when they perceive greenwashing on any level. Sustainable branding enables brands to differentiate themselves in a competitive environment while fostering lasting loyalty and aligning with consumer expectations for responsible business practices.

2.6 Discussing sustainability initiatives represents a significant shift in PR strategy to address environmental concerns in the fashion sector

Sustainability efforts have recreated the meaning of PR activities in the fashion industry, where companies are no longer emphasising image-based campaigns in favour of purpose-driven communication. Environmental responsibility is being increasingly incorporated into the core messaging of brands, with PR being used to document the efforts made to achieve this, including circular fashion, ethical sourcing, and carbon reduction (Mohapatra & Rajesh, 2025). This trend is a response to an increasing demand for transparency and accountability among consumers of all ages, particularly among young people. The sustainability officers have now aligned with the PR departments so that messaging rhymes with reportable effect, rather than marketing hype. The reframing of environmentally sustainable cultures, such as retyled garments or eco-friendly materials, has become a key part of the brand story (4ocean, 2025). Nevertheless, these approaches are only effective when these claims are real; shallow assertions of greenwashing may have the opposite effect. All in all, sustainability-focused PR helps not only to build brand reputation but also fosters long-term trust and loyalty by aligning corporate values with current environmental issues.

2.7 Theoretical Underpinnings

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) model comprises three pillars of sustainability: profit (economy), people (society), and planet (environment). This framework suggests that the company's performance, through a TBL approach, embodies its vision of corporate social responsibility (CSR), which has a positive overall impact on the world in terms of economic, environmental, and social aspects (Fan & Chang, 2023). A business can only be considered a socially and environmentally responsible organisation when it begins to measure its social and environmental impact. Regarding the current study, the application of the TBL theory offers better benefits to fast fashion sector companies in implementing sustainability in their business strategies.

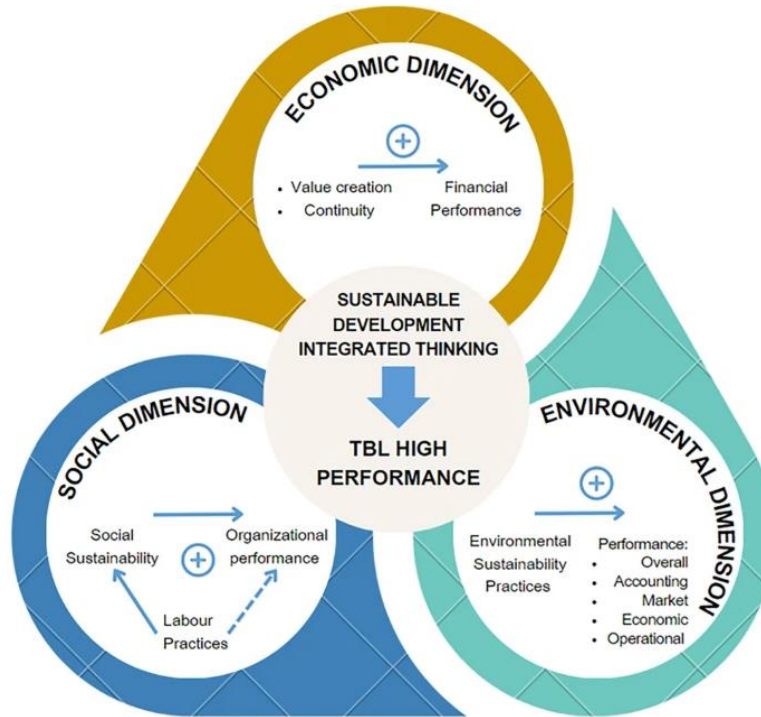


Figure 2: TBL theory
(Source: Nogueira et al., 2025)

2.8 Literature Gap

The literature lacks a comprehensive understanding of how sustainable branding and CSR processes influence long-term consumer loyalty across diverse cultural contexts. Most studies concentrate on either short-term perceptions or solely on Western markets and fail to consider emerging economies and the more subtle influence of greenwashing awareness on consumer trust and behaviour.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research philosophy

An **interpretivism research philosophy** has been selected for the current research work, which focuses on understanding how H&M utilises in-store recycling and ‘Conscious’ collection to balance sustainable fast fashion. As mentioned by Alborough & Hansen (2022), an interpretivist research style can be applicable when you wish to discover social processes and analyse the dialogue of plural voices and internal sense-making that is commonly lacking in single positivist orientations. Thus, considering the research work, it has been stated that the utilisation of interpretivist research philosophy has been proven beneficial in gaining an understanding of the social perspective on sustainable fast fashion.

3.2 Research Approach

The current research study has followed a **deductive research approach** to investigate the integration of sustainability initiatives by H&M, specifically regarding in-store recycling and the ‘Conscious’ collection, with a core focus on green marketing, CSR, and sustainable branding. According to Kim (2021), the deductive research approach enables researchers to maintain a clear focus on the study's purpose. Deriving specific facts from general facts in social science, including pre-theory, post-examination, theoretical hypothesis research, observation, and generalisation, is also a deductive process. The researcher would start with an effective theory and subsequently translate it with data.

3.3 Research design

An **explanatory research design** has been followed throughout the study to explain H&M's sustainability initiatives, which aim to balance eco-friendly fashion through in-store recycling and the ‘Conscious’ collection. As mentioned by Margolis et al. (2022), an explanatory trial aims to test interventions with the primary goal of determining efficacy under ideal conditions. Thus, it has been determined that the application of the respective research design has been proven effective in enhancing the quality of explanation of the process by which H&M uses in-store recycling and ‘Conscious’ collection.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The **secondary qualitative data collection** method has been used in this research study to collect reliable and authentic secondary information and data regarding H&M's sustainability initiatives, like in-store recycling and ‘Conscious’ collection, focusing on green marketing and CSR. Moreover, the **case study data analysis** method has been employed in this work to effectively evaluate H&M's sustainability initiatives, which contribute to achieving a balance in sustainable fast fashion. Case study analysis has been beneficial in this work for gathering real-time data on the study's focus area.

3.5 Inclusion & Exclusion, PRISMA and Boolean Operator

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeframe	Published since 2020	Published before 2020
Geographic Focus	European region UK	The county where H&M does not operate
Language	Clear English language	Other than the English language
Target Population	Age group between 20-40	Below and above the 20-40 age group

Table 3.1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

(Source: Author)

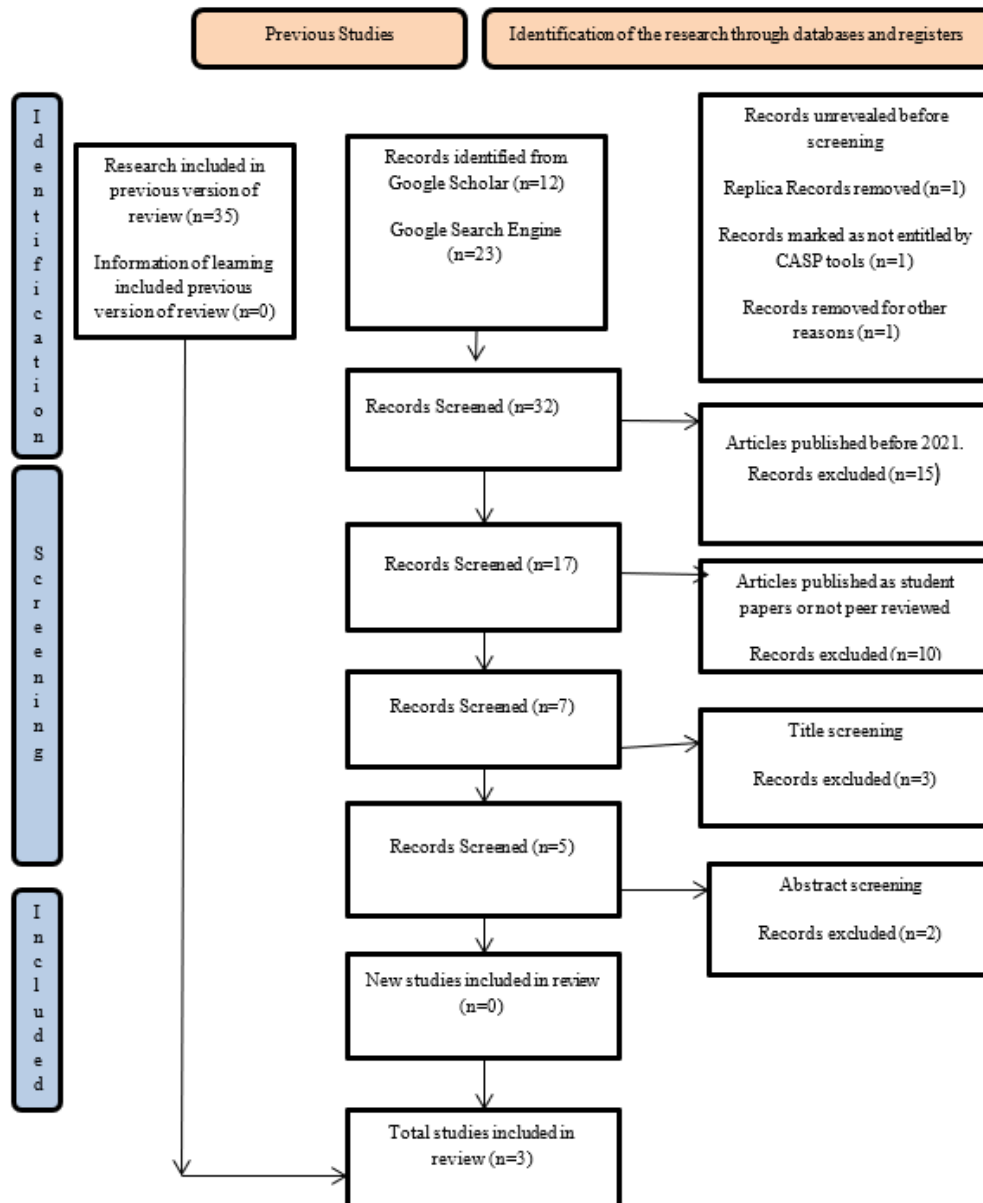


Figure 3: PRISMA framework
(Source: Author)

Concept 1	Boolean Operator	Concept 2
"H&M"	AND	"In-store recycling"
"H&M"	AND	"Conscious collection"
"Green marketing"	AND	"Corporate Social Responsibility" OR "CSR"
"Sustainable branding"	AND	"Consumer perception" OR "brand loyalty"
"H&M sustainability"	AND	(authenticity OR greenwashing OR "PR strategy")

Figure 4: Boolean Operator
(Source: Author)

3.6 Ethics

The research has adhered to the research principles outlined in the university handbook to ensure that it does not encounter any ethical limitations imposed by the university. Moreover, every secondary source has been properly cited in the text to prevent any issues with incorrect referencing. The information in the investigation was retrieved based on the reliability of the sources, and it was not sourced from sponsored sources, as required by the university.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Case Study 1: In-Store Recycling Programme

The Global In-Store Garment Collection program (2013) is an innovative initiative by H&M to introduce the concept of circular fashion into the fast fashion sector (H&M Group, 2025). Customers can bring unwanted textiles, of any brand and in any condition, to almost every H&M store worldwide. These products are sent and classified by partners such as REMONDIS and Looper Textile Co., which sort them for resale, reuse, or reprocessing. By 2023, the project is expected to have collected more than 172,000 tones of garments worldwide (H&M Group, 2025). The good clothes are sold again as second-hand items, whereas the others are converted into other products, such as cleaning cloths or insulation materials. Some of it is recycled through textile-to-textile recycling, while the remaining portion that cannot be recycled is disposed of, and is put first for energy recovery. Not only does this program help avoid representing waste volumes through removing textiles from landfills, but it also provides a form of education - it helps educate consumers about sustainability. It is clear that H&M are partly aware of their environmental footprint and is trying to do more with a circular fashion approach.

4.1.2 Case Study 2: *Green marketing and CSR initiatives*

H&M has also acknowledged green marketing and corporate social responsibility (CSR), which is their effort to steer their fast fashion operations toward aligning with sustainable production practices. One initiative in supporting Greta is its in-store recycling program, which allows customers to leave their old or unwanted clothing to be recycled in exchange for a voucher. The goal is to reduce textile waste and create a circular fashion. H&M is a global fashion retailer which promotes its Conscious line, using sustainable textiles such as recycled polyester and organic cotton. Since 2013, H&M Group has collected over 155,000 tones of garments globally in

its recycling program, sorting items for resale, reuse or recycling based on their condition and material (H&M Group, 2023).

4.1.3 Case Study 3: *The effectiveness of sustainable branding to improve consumer perception and loyalty*

H&M's sustainable branding has had a moderate impact on consumer perception, but long-term loyalty remains a complex issue. The company's initiatives, such as the 'Conscious' collection and in-store recycling, have helped position it as a more sustainable brand, with 63% of Gen Z and Millennials more likely to purchase from brands defined by sustainable values (Netimperative, 2021). However, accusations of greenwashing and contradictions in H&M's sustainability narrative have undermined consumer trust. While eco-conscious consumers may initially be attracted, commitment to true loyalty goes beyond marketing and involves communication, transparency and operational changes within the business. Therefore, H&M's sustainable branding has improved perception, but the perceived push towards sustainable value might be limited without full accountability of the supply chain.

4.2 Analysis

The literature review and case study findings revealed both similarities and differences in theory and practice regarding the use of green marketing, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and sustainable branding in the fashion industry, as illustrated by H&M.

In theory, green marketing is advocated for its use as a tool for marketing not only eco-products but also for shaping the environmental ethics of both consumers and corporations (Panca et al., 2023). The findings affirmed that H&M has implemented some of these ideals into its operations, such as the Global In-Store Garment Collection and Conscious Collection. These programs embody circular fashion and resource efficiency, promoting ideas that raise environmental concerns through recycling and sustainability. Literature suggests that green marketing is effective in reducing ecological harm, but the case study findings also reveal new challenges and limitations. The scale at which H&M engages in garment collection (172,000 tonnes) is typical of a large fast-fashion retailer; however, relative to the H&M industry's output (1.5 billion garments annually), the amount collected is a fraction of what is being produced and sold to consumers (H&M Group, 2025). The apparent discrepancy between sustainability-related marketing efforts and reality suggests a disconnection between H&M and consumer perceptions of its environmental claims.

The existing literature about CSR highlights ethical production, fair labour, and environmentally responsible practices (Singh, 2024). In this study, the findings suggest that H&M have tried to integrate CSR into their business model through transparent recycling systems and ethically sourced materials. Nonetheless, this research, while acknowledging that H&M has programs and policies in place, does not shy away from critique. There were also findings raised regarding ethical considerations and developing an ethical relationship with netizens, particularly about greenwashing, which contrasts with the theoretical idealised form of CSR. For instance, outlined in their recent Critical Sustainability report outlined that H&M was one of the fashion brands that made "misleading sustainability labelling", indicating the distance between CSR goals and consumer understanding, with no verification of the practice.

In line with sustainable branding, the literature synthesises sustainability as a critical and fundamental component of long-term brand equity, customer trust, loyalty and perceived market differentiation (Javed et al., 2023). The case study findings presented in Case Study 3, et al., align with H&M's positioning for the relatively younger and environmentally conscious groups. The consumer preference data, showing that 63% of Gen Z and Millennials prefer to shop with brands that have sustainable initiatives, further supports the conceptual relationship between brand image and consumer behaviour towards brands with sustainable claims (Netimperative, 2021). Consumer

loyalty can be fragile, and accusations of "green washing" can erode trust. Sustainable branding can provide a competitive advantage, but challenges like H&M highlight the need for transparency and verifiable sustainability claims. A shift in PR strategy from image-led promotion to purpose-driven stories is suggested, bridging the gap between theory and practice.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been stated that the in-store recycling programs and 'Conscious' collection seen in H&M showcase an attempt to combine green marketing, CSR, and sustainable branding with the fast fashion concept. Although these tactics have made consumers positively perceive and engage with the business, especially the younger generation. Questions arise regarding the legitimacy of such practices, as consumer-chanting suggests that it was merely greenwashing by the company to capitalise on consumer goodwill, despite the overwhelming production rates. The study employed a secondary qualitative data collection method, along with case study analysis, which helped gain an understanding of H&M's sustainable business initiatives.

5.2 Study limitations

The study has several limitations that may impede the overall investigation process and its validity. As the work focuses on using secondary data, which restricts the research to interpreting first-hand information and real-time experience of people about sustainable fast fashion. Moreover, the key focus on H&M also limited data collection about the use of sustainability initiatives by other fashion companies.

5.3 Future scope

The study will significantly contribute to future works on similar focus areas by providing accurate data and information about sustainable fast fashion, green marketing, in-store recycling, and other related topics. Moreover, the study will serve as a primary source of information for fashion retailers to gain insights into H&M's sustainability initiatives.

5.4 Recommendation

The realm of sustainable business practices can be enhanced by adopting environmentally friendly materials, promoting responsible labour, and implementing effective business models (Odeyemi et al., 2023). For instance, **Zara** is owned by Inditex, which has announced that by 2025, the entire collection of this high-street fashion chain will be created using 100% sustainable fabrics (Conlon, 2019).

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