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**Consumer Perception, Evaluation, and Trust in  
Sustainability Efforts in the Fast Fashion Industry:  
The Role of Individualistic and Collectivistic  
Cultural Values**

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**ABSTRACT:**

The fast fashion industry has faced intense scepticism over the past decade due to its significant environmental and social impacts i.e. pollution, excessive waste, and unethical labour conditions. However, despite the increase in sustainability initiatives, the industry is struggling with a credibility crisis and frequent accusations of greenwashing. Consequently, communicating sustainability effectively has become a complex challenge, particularly in global markets where cultural values shape the interpretation of such messages. The main objective of this thesis was to examine how consumer trust in sustainability communications is perceived and evaluated, and how these processes drive trust formation across individualistic and collectivistic cultural contexts within the fast fashion industry. Based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, the thesis employs a qualitative literature review, supported by illustrative industry examples, to synthesise perspectives of consumer behaviour, information processing, and marketing communications.

The key findings reveal fundamental cultural differences in how trust is established between the two cultural contexts. Consumers in individualistic cultures rely on calculative trust, where credibility is built through rational logic, factual evidence, and institutional mechanisms. These consumers perceive sustainability as a set of technical attributes and require transparency, such as third-party certifications and detailed supply chain audits to mitigate scepticism. Conversely, trust in collectivistic cultures is driven by affective factors, where relationships, benevolence, and social influence are the primary sources of credibility and trust is transferred to the brand from reliable intermediaries, such as local opinion leaders or influencers. Furthermore, a brand's commitment to corporate social responsibility and group harmony is prioritised over technical product information.

The thesis concludes that standardised global strategies are ineffective, and instead, brands must adopt culturally adaptive communication strategies. This means prioritising evidence-based transparency in individualistic markets and social influence in collectivistic markets. Aligning communication with these distinct cultural trust mechanisms allows brands to effectively reduce scepticism and promote sustainable behaviour.

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**KEYWORDS:** fast fashion, sustainability communication, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, individualism, collectivism, trust formation, consumer behaviour, cross-cultural marketing

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**TIIVISTELMÄ:**

Pikamuotiteollisuuteen on kohdistunut viime vuosikymmenen aikana lisääntyttä kriittistä tarkastelua alan merkittävien ympäristö- ja sosiaalivaikutusten vuoksi. Koska ala aiheuttaa saasteita, liiallista jätettä ja epäeettisiä työoloja, kasvava kuluttajaryhmä vaatii vastuullisuutta ja läpinäkyvyyttä. Kestävyysaloitteiden lisääntymisestä huolimatta ala kamppailee uskottavuuskriisin ja toistuvien viherpesusyytösten kanssa. Tämän seurauksena vaikuttavasta kestävyysviestinnästä on muodostunut monitahoinen haaste globaaleilla markkinoilla, joilla kulttuuriset arvot ohjaavat viestien tulkintaa. Tutkielman päätavoitteena oli analysoida, miten kestävyysviestintää havaitaan ja arvioidaan individualistisissa ja kollektivistisissä kulttuureissa, ja kuinka nämä prosessit vaikuttavat kuluttajien luottamuksen muodostumiseen pikamuotiteollisuudessa. Hofsteden kulttuuriulottuvuuksien teoriaan pohjautuen, tutkielma hyödyntää laadullista kirjallisuuskatsausta, jota tukevat havainnollistavat esimerkit pikamuodin alalta. Tutkielman tavoitteena on syntetisoida kuluttajakäyttäytymisen, tiedonkäsittelyn ja markkinointiviestinnän näkökulmia.

Keskeiset havainnot osoittavat, että luottamuksen muodostumisessa on perustavanlaatuisia eroja näiden kahden kulttuurikontekstin välillä. Individualistisissa kulttuureissa kuluttajat tukeutuvat laskelmoivaan luottamukseen, jossa uskottavuus rakentuu loogisten perusteiden, faktatiedon ja institutionaalisten mekanismien varaan. Nämä kuluttajat mieltävät kestävyuden teknisten ominaisuuksien kokonaisuutena ja edellyttävät läpinäkyvyyttä, kuten kolmannen osapuolen sertifikaatteja sekä yksityiskohtaista tietoa toimitusketjuista, lievittääkseen skeptisyyttä. Sitä vastoin, kollektivistisissä kulttuureissa luottamusta ohjaavat affektiiviset eli tunneperäiset tekijät, jolloin uskottavuuden ensisijaisia lähteitä ovat ihmissuhteet, hyväntahtoisuus ja sosiaalinen vaikutusvalta. Näissä konteksteissa luottamus välittyy brändille luotettavien tahojen, kuten paikallisten mielipidevaikuttajien, kautta. Lisäksi brändin sitoutuminen yhteiskuntavastuuseen ja ryhmäharmonian ylläpitämiseen nähdään teknisiä tuotetietoja merkittävämpinä tekijöinä.

Tutkielma osoittaa, että standardoidut globaalit strategiat ovat riittämättömiä. Brändien on sen sijaan hyödynnettävä kulttuurisesti mukautuvia viestintästrategioita. Tämä edellyttää näyttöön perustuvan läpinäkyvyyden painottamista individualistisilla markkinoilla ja sosiaalisen vaikutusvallan korostamista kollektiivisilla markkinoilla. Mukauttamalla viestintää näihin erilaisiin luottamusmekanismeihin brändit voivat tehokkaasti vähentää skeptisyyttä ja edistää kestävästä kulutuskäyttäytymistä.

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**AVAINSANAT:** fast fashion, sustainability communication, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, individualism, collectivism, trust formation, consumer behaviour, cross-cultural marketing

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Figure 1. Summary of the thesis findings regarding trust mechanisms and communication strategies

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# 1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the thesis by first presenting the background of the thesis and followed by defining the main research objective and questions. Further, the delimitations of the thesis are established, and the key terms used in the thesis are defined. Lastly, the overall structure of the thesis is introduced along with a declaration on the use of artificial intelligence.

## 1.1 Background of the thesis

The fast fashion industry is one of the most criticised sectors for its environmental and social impacts (Niinimäki et al., 2020). The rapid production cycles, resource-intensive manufacturing, and extensive global supply chains have raised serious concerns regarding water usage and pollution of environment with carbon dioxide and other damaging chemicals, as well as social concerns regarding the relocation of most brands' production to developing countries with lower labour costs and social regulations (Dickenbrok & Martinez, 2018; Fletcher, 2010). Although fast fashion, a business model characterised by rapid production cycles and low costs to capture current trends (Miranda and Roldán, 2023) cannot be assumed to be sustainable by default (Niinimäki et al., 2020), numerous brands are increasingly striving to improve their practices (Arrigo, 2020). In response to growing criticism, global fast fashion brands, such as H&M and Zara, have implemented various sustainability initiatives, including eco-collections and recycling programs, yet consumer's trust in these initiatives remains fragile, primarily due to alleged green-washing: the perception that brands exaggerate or misrepresent the environmental impact of their actions (Meet et al., 2024; Neumann et al., 2021). Building trust in sustainability communication may play a significant role in influencing consumer trust, particularly in terms of loyalty, purchase intention, and customer retention (Neumann et al., 2021). Without credibility, sustainability communication fails to foster consumer trust.

Furthermore, as fast fashion brands enter culturally diverse international markets, understanding how cultural values influence the formation of consumer trust towards sustainability claims in communication is critical. Typically, fast fashion brands operate on a global scale, engaging with international markets where culture is both diverse and deeply embedded in social practices, norms, and communication styles (Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2015; Dickenbrok & Martinez, 2018). Among cultural contexts, individualistic and collectivistic dimensions play a central role in shaping how trust is constructed through communication (Doney et al., 1998; Hofstede, 2001). Individualistic cultures are associated with self-consistent values, which influence trust formation and ethical evaluations alongside independence and personal responsibility, whereas collectivistic cultures, shaped by societal influence, are guided by community expectations, group norms, and social harmony (Hofstede, 2001). To better understand the factors shaping consumer trust towards sustainability communication in the fast fashion industry, this thesis also focuses on the cultural dimensions of individualistic and collectivistic values. This provides an insight for explaining why consumers across cultures differ in how they perceive, interpret, and respond to sustainability claims.

## **1.2 Research objectives and questions**

The main research objective of this thesis is to explore **how consumers from individualistic and collectivistic cultural contexts perceive and evaluate sustainability efforts in the fast fashion industry and how these differences influence their trust in fast fashion brands' sustainability communication**. This study focuses on individualistic and collectivistic cultural values to provide insights into why consumer perceptions of sustainability differ across cultures, and how these differences influence their trust in fast fashion brands' sustainability communication.

To address this objective, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1. How do consumers from individualistic cultural contexts differ from collectivistic cultures in their perception of sustainability communication of the fast fashion industry?**
- 2. How do consumers from individualistic cultural contexts differ from collectivistic cultures in their evaluation of sustainability communication of the fast fashion industry?**
- 3. How does the perception and evaluation of sustainability communication of consumers from individualistic and collectivistic cultural contexts influence their trust toward sustainability claims in the fast fashion industry?**

### **1.3 Delimitations of the thesis**

The scope of this thesis is to understand the influence of cultural values, specifically individualism and collectivism, on consumer perceptions and trust toward communication of sustainability efforts in the fast fashion industry. The thesis examines how consumers in these cultural contexts interpret sustainability communication. The thesis is limited to the fast fashion industry, and therefore, the findings may not be generalisable to other sectors. Further, this thesis concentrates on perceptions and trust formation rather than managerial or production-level practices. Lastly, the discussion mainly emphasises the environmental dimension of sustainability, while social and economic aspects are addressed only briefly.

This thesis utilises Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (2001) as its primary framework due to its established validity and continued relevance in international marketing research (Soares et al., 2007; Beugelsdijk et al., 2015). While the theory identifies six cultural dimensions, this thesis strategically focuses on the individualism-collectivism dimension, as it is the most fundamental factor distinguishing variations in social behaviour and communication styles (Triandis, 2018; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Notably, the individualism-collectivism is directly linked to the mechanisms of trust formation; it dictates whether trust is established through logical evaluation and facts or through emotional connections and social influence (Doney et al., 1998).

Furthermore, recent research identifies this dimension as a significant determinant of sustainability credibility and consumer evaluation in green advertising (Ruanguttamanun, 2023; Cho et al., 2013). Consequently, focusing exclusively on individualism-collectivism dimension provides the necessary depth to answer the research questions, as other dimensions offer less explanatory power regarding the specific trust mechanisms within the context of fast fashion sustainability claims.

#### **1.4 Definitions of key terms**

##### *Fast fashion*

Fast fashion refers to a business model characterised by the rapid production of a wide range of garments that are continuously renewed and designed to follow the latest fashion trends at affordable prices (Miranda & Roldán, 2023).

##### *Sustainability*

Development that seeks to balance the needs of the present and the future without limiting future generations' ability to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In the context of fast fashion, sustainability refers to efforts aimed at minimising negative environmental and social impacts across the supply chain through practices, such as waste reduction, responsible sourcing, and transparency in production (Dickenbrok & Martinez, 2018).

##### *Consumer perception*

According to Solomon (2009), consumer perception describes the process through which individuals interpret, organise, and select information about brands, products, and marketing messages to form judgments and attitudes. Its formation is guided by personal experiences, cultural values, and external influences, such as social norms or advertising (Solomon, 2009). In this thesis, consumer perception focuses on how individuals evaluate and interpret sustainability claims made by fast fashion brands.

##### *Cultural values*

Cultural values refer to collective beliefs, aspirations, and ethical standards shared within a society that guide attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions (Schwartz, 1999; Hofstede, 2001). Through them, individuals interpret social reality and make decisions that reflect different ways of relating to themselves and others within social contexts (Schwartz, 1999; Hofstede, 2001). Examples of such cultural values are individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 2001).

#### *Individualism*

According to Hofstede (2001), individualism refers to societies in which people are expected to look after themselves and their immediate family only. Individualistic cultural context emphasises individual achievement, personal autonomy, and self-expression.

#### *Collectivism*

Collectivism on the other hand refers to societies in which individuals are integrated into strong, cohesive groups that provide protection in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede, 2001). Collectivistic cultural context emphasises conformity to group norms, interdependence, and social harmony (Hofstede, 2001).

#### *Trust*

Trust refers to an individual's willingness to rely on exchange partner's compassion, equity, and integrity under conditions of uncertainty and vulnerability (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In the context of this thesis, it specifically refers to consumers' belief in the credibility and authenticity of a brand's sustainability claims and actions.

### **1.5 Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is organised into five interconnected chapters that collectively build a coherent understanding of sustainability perceptions in the fast fashion industry. The first chapter introduces the thesis by outlining its background, research objectives and questions, delimitations, and key conceptual definitions, and concludes with an over-

view of the entire thesis structure. The second chapter presents an in-depth literature review that positions the fast fashion industry within broader sustainability debates, examining the sector's defining characteristics, the challenges it faces, and the emerging sustainability initiatives and communication practices adopted by brands. The third chapter explores the cultural and social factors that shape consumer perceptions of sustainability, analysing how cultural values influence the evaluation of sustainability claims in fast fashion. The fourth chapter investigates cross-cultural differences in consumer trust, defining trust within the sustainability context and examining how its formation differs between individualistic and collectivistic cultural settings, as well as how these distinctions affect consumer attitudes and behaviours. The final chapter synthesises the key findings, discusses the theoretical and managerial implications of the thesis, and offers recommendations for future research.

## **1.6 Declaration on the Use of AI**

The use of AI tools such as ChatGPT and Google Gemini were used exclusively for proofreading and editing purposes to ensure clarity and linguistic consistency, as the researcher is a non-English native speaker. However, this thesis does not use any AI-generated contents.

## **2 Fast fashion and sustainability**

This chapter provides an overview of the fast fashion industry and its sustainability challenges. It begins by examining the fast fashion industry's reliance on speed and low-cost production, its sustainability context as well as consumer trust, focusing on the environmental and social impacts. Finally, the chapter examines how the industry communicates and implements initiatives to address these issues.

### **2.1 Fast fashion industry**

The fast fashion industry has been described as the most dynamic segment of the fashion industry since the 1990s due to its rapid growth, which has outpaced the development of the entire fashion industry (Miranda & Roldán, 2023). Although fast fashion's business model relies on large-scale production and standardisation to keep costs low, it does not mass-produce identical garments in the traditional sense (Miranda & Roldán, 2023). Instead, products are designed to be cheap and quickly manufactured using low-cost materials and labour (Fletcher, 2010). Fast fashion brands release small batches of numerous different styles combined with short lead and distribution times, allowing supply to be adjusted to rapidly changing consumer demand and trends (Fletcher, 2010; Cachon & Swinney, 2011; Miranda & Roldán, 2023).

Until the 1990s, fashion production followed a seasonal structure with two collections, spring-summer and autumn-winter (Miranda & Roldán, 2023). According to Miranda and Roldán (2023), the traditional business model was inefficient, as it relied on unpredictable consumer demand, which often led to sales and a surplus of unsold clothing. In contrast, fast fashion brands operate with extremely short production cycles, only a few weeks, allowing them to postpone design decisions until emerging trends are clear. This enables them to respond quickly to consumer preferences, allowing those preferences and purchasing behaviour to directly shape garment design (Miranda & Roldán, 2023).

This constant renewal serves a strategic purpose. According to Bhardwaj and Fairhurst (2010), fast fashion retailers intentionally create a sense of scarcity by rapidly turning over inventory, which encourages impulse purchases. Consumers feel that a product available today may be gone tomorrow, creating an immediate sense of urgency to purchase. This urgency is further reinforced by the industry's pricing structure. According to Miranda and Roldán (2023), the fast fashion business model is structured to encourage frequent shopping. Low prices allow consumers to gain immediate satisfaction without the concern for making wrong choices or significant investments. Consequently, many consumers are willing to trade off product quality and sustainability to constantly update their wardrobes with the latest trends, driven by the combination of affordability and the fear of missing out.

The fast fashion market is dominated by global leaders such as H&M Group and Inditex, best known for its flagship brand Zara (Caro and Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2015; Arrigo, 2020) alongside the ultra-fast fashion powerhouse Shein (Qu, 2024). Together these retailers have standardised the industry's business model (Arrigo, 2010) and established the benchmarks for efficiency and speed that characterise the fast fashion industry (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010).

## **2.2 Sustainability context in fast fashion**

The concept of sustainability involves progress that meets present-day needs while ensuring that the well-being and resources of future generations are not compromised (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In the context of fast fashion, sustainability is a multifaceted concept often characterised by varying terminologies. Terms such as "green fashion", "ethical fashion", and "sustainable fashion" are used to refer to the same underlying concept (Papadopoulou et al., 2021). Additionally related terms like "slow fashion" are used to describe the production and consumption processes, emphasising the shift away from the rapid turnover typical of fast fashion models (Fletcher, 2010).

The concept of sustainable fashion emphasises the quality and longevity over quantity and passing trends and can be separated into two interconnected dimensions: the “green” and the “ethical” (Papadopoulou, 2021). According to Papadopoulou et al. (2021), green fashion focuses on environmental issues, such as minimising environmental impacts by reducing pollution, recycling materials, and using natural resources. In contrast, ethical fashion focuses on the social aspects of the supply chains through practices, such as fair-trade principles, worker welfare, and labour conditions. Sustainability context in the fast fashion refers to efforts aimed at minimising negative environmental and social impacts across the supply chain through practices, such as waste reduction, responsible sourcing, and transparency in production (Dickenbrok & Martinez, 2018).

Despite these definitions, applying the concept of sustainability to the fast fashion industry presents an inherent contradiction. As described before, fast fashion business models by nature may be unsustainable (Miranda & Roldán, 2023). In contrast, principles of sustainability advocate longevity, reduced consumption, and slower production cycles (Fletcher, 2010; Niinimäki, 2010). To navigate this contradiction and respond to growing consumer pressure, many fast fashion brands have introduced sustainable collections alongside their conventional offerings (Neumann et al., 2021). These collections, such as H&M’s Conscious Collection or Zara’s Join Life, act as the primary instrument for sustainable development actions in the industry (Neumann et al., 2021). Typically, they feature garments made from organic or recycled materials and are marked with green labelling (Papadopoulou et al., 2022). However, these initiatives often represent only a small fraction of the companies’ total output (Becker-Olsen & Potucek, 2013; Niinimäki et al., 2020). For consumers, these collections create a dual market situation, where sustainable and traditional products coexist within the same brand, requiring them to actively evaluate and differentiate between product lines (Joy et al., 2012; Neumann et al., 2021).

### 2.3 Sustainability challenges in the fast fashion industry

The fundamental sustainability challenge of the fast fashion industry is its reliance on a linear business model that emphasises unsustainable practices (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Niinimäki et al., 2020). The Ellen MacArthur Foundation published a report in 2017 titled *A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion's Future*, which stated that growing awareness of the environmental impacts of fast fashion has led brands and retailers to address specific supply chain challenges, both individually and through industry-wide initiatives. However, most efforts remain focused on mitigating impacts within the linear system, such as improving production efficiency or material use, rather than addressing its root causes, particularly low garment utilisations and recycling rates. These systemic shortcomings are closely tied to the structure of the fast fashion supply chain, which is defined by decentralised production structure and geographical fragmentation, encompassing diverse sectors, such as agriculture, petrochemicals, manufacturing, logistics, and retail (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017), large amounts of non-renewable natural resources are extracted for clothing production. These resources are often used only for a short period, after which the materials are primarily sent to landfills or incinerated. The report estimates that more than USD 500 billion in value is lost each year due to underutilisation of clothing and the lack of effective recycling (p.22). This creates a systemic issue where economic growth is directly tied to increasing environmental degradation, making the transition to a circular economy particularly difficult for fast fashion brands (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

This context provides a fundamental starting point for analysing the sustainability challenges of the fast fashion industry. As noted by Bick et al. (2018), each state of the global supply chain generates significant environmental impacts, creating a direct link between industrial activities and ecological degradation. The following sections examine these key challenges, focusing to the implications of transportation and outsourcing, the

crisis of textile waste and overproduction, and the intensity of resource consumption and pollution.

### **2.3.1 Global supply chains and logistics**

According to Niinimäki et al. (2020), the fast fashion business model relies heavily on the outsourcing of production to low- and middle-income countries to minimise costs and maximise production volumes. This relocation of textile and apparel production has increased complexity and reduced transparency, while fibre and textile processing remain resource-intensive and waste-generating. As noted by Caro and Martínez-de-Albéniz (2015), the industry's supply chains are highly fragmented and globalised.

According to Niinimäki et al. (2020), production typically takes place in developing countries such as Bangladesh, China, India, Turkey, and Vietnam, which increases the logistical flows between the various processing stages. After manufacturing, finished garments are shipped in large volumes to centralised retail distribution centres and then forward to retailers, commonly located in the EU, USA, and UK, where design processes also take place. Retailers often struggle to monitor the practices of second- or third-tier suppliers, making it difficult to ensure adherence to environmental regulations or fair labour standards throughout the distribution network (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014; Niinimäki et al., 2020). The huge volumes of garments transported globally, combined with these carbon-intensive logistics operations, significantly increases the industry's greenhouse gas emissions (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

### **2.3.2 Textile waste and over production**

While delivering clothes to consumers in high-income countries is considered the goal of the fashion industry, environmental injustices persist long after the sale, as the fast fashion model encourages the treatment of clothes as disposable (Bick et al., 2018). Textile waste has increased dramatically in the fast fashion industry since the 1990s and early 2000s, when large amounts of cheap and disposable used clothing that second-

hand retailers could not withstand overloaded countries, especially Europe, China, and North America (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Cullen, 2024). Traditionally, textile waste in Western countries has been managed through the export of used garments to developing nations, usually to African and Latin American countries (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Cullen, 2024). However, this disposal route is increasingly restricted as many developing countries implement anti-dumping regulations to prevent the importation of low-quality textile waste (Niinimäki et al., 2020). According to Brooks (2015), major economies such as South Africa and Nigeria have attempted to restrict imports to protect their domestic textile industries, while Zimbabwe implemented punitive tariffs as early as 1995 after lobbying by local manufacturers. Consequently, a significant number of discarded textiles now remain in Europe and other Western countries, causing a household waste crisis, with the surplus largely ending up incinerated or landfilled due to inadequate recycling infrastructure (DeVoy et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2025). Supplying affordable clothing to low-income areas began as a seemingly harmless strategy, but the overwhelming growth in volumes eventually caused both environmental and social issues (Cullen, 2024).

The fast fashion industry generates significant waste at all stages of the value chain, making textile waste a growing environmental concern (Lee et al., 2025). This waste originates from three main sources: yarn, fibre, and fabric production as well as post-consumer disposal (Lee et al., 2025), and is classified as pre-consumer and post-consumer textile waste (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Pre-consumer textile waste, also called production waste, consist mainly of fabric waste, along with fibre and yarn waste generated during manufacturing, of which fabric waste accounts for the majority due to inefficiencies in the cutting stage (Niinimäki et al., 2020). These early stages already impose significant environmental burdens through high water use, energy consumption, and greenhouse gas emission (DeVoy et al., 2021). However, most of the industry's textile waste emerges after consumer use, as post-consumer textile waste consists of discarded garments with short life cycles typical to fast fashion (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

It represents the largest and most difficult waste streams to manage due to their mixed nature and consumer-driven disposal (Stella et al., 2024).

### **2.3.3 Resource consumption and pollution**

The fashion industry's environmental impact is considerable, as it relies on high water consumption, generates substantial carbon emissions, and releases harmful chemicals into the environment (Dickenbrok & Martinez, 2018). The production of textiles, particularly cotton, requires large amounts of water (Niinimäki et al., 2020). In 2017, the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) published the report *Valuing Our Clothes: The Cost of UK Fashion*, where they estimated that one kilogram of cotton can consume between 10 000 and 20 000 litres of water, depending on the region of cultivation. According to Niinimäki et al. (2020), in 2015 the fashion industry consumed 79 billion cubic meters of water globally, and an estimated 200 tons of water were required for producing one ton of textiles.

Annually, the industry generates an estimated 2,9 Gt of emissions measured as carbon dioxide, mainly from synthetic fibres and energy-intensive production processes (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Energy use drives the fashion industry's carbon footprint, with synthetics like polyester needing more energy, while natural fibres such as cotton require more water and chemicals (Niinimäki et al., 2020), including pesticides and fertilisers that contribute emissions and pollution (DeVoy et al., 2021). Additionally, according to Bick et al., (2018), textile dyeing generates hazardous wastewater that often contains heavy metals and other toxicants, threatening aquatic ecosystems and human health in nearby communities. However, approximately 80% of textiles consumed in the EU are produced outside the EU, complicating the assessment of total chemical usage (Niinimäki et al., 202).

## 2.4 Sustainability communication and industry initiatives

Sustainability communication plays a crucial role in how fashion companies demonstrate responsibility, build legitimacy, and foster trust among stakeholders (Braga et al., 2024). According to Adomßent & Godemann (2011), sustainability communication is understood as a process of creating shared understanding of sustainability issues by integrating environmental and social concerns into organisational communication. In the fashion industry, where sustainability challenges are widely considered, effective communication has become an essential strategic tool (Braga et al., 2024).

Braga et al. (2024) note that sustainability advertising and marketing initiatives play a critical role in shaping consumer perceptions. Companies often use advertising to communicate sustainability-focused messages, promote environmentally friendly products, and strengthen their reputation. Consumer reactions are therefore a central theme in sustainability communication research, as the success of companies' sustainability initiatives depend heavily on how consumers interpret and evaluate these messages. Sustainability communication is most effective when messages align with consumers' values and expectations, build trust, and enhance positive attitudes toward the brand.

According to Miranda and Roldán (2023), during the last decade, the fast fashion industry has been strongly affected by the growing use of e-commerce and social networks, such as Instagram and Facebook. Influencers activity within these social networks has created new forms of communication that shape consumer behaviour and trends. Fast fashion brands have implemented communication strategies through the Internet as websites and social networks have become a new shopping platform for fast fashion brands. Through social marketing techniques, companies attempt not only to showcase their own sustainability initiatives but also to influence customers toward more sustainable consumption practices (Braga et al., 2024).

Braga et al. (2024) confirm that marketing strategies have evolved from simple green claims to more complex narratives involving transparency regarding supply chains, materials, and corporate social responsibility efforts. To signal these efforts to consumers, the industry relies heavily on eco-labels and certifications (Dickenbrok & Martinez, 2018; Papadopoulou et al., 2022). Alkkiomäki et al. (2024) recently analysed how fast fashion companies use Instagram to build legitimacy for their operations. According to their findings, brands use specific legitimation strategies that combine sustainability claims with carefully curated visual and verbal cues. The aim of this discursive practice is to legitimise the current fast fashion system, making the controversial business model appear acceptable and in line with social values despite its inherent unsustainability.

In the fast fashion industry, sustainability communication is demonstrated through a variety of specific claims designed to convey responsibility (Braga et al., 2024; Dickenbrok & Martinez, 2018). Brands often highlight specific inputs, such as “100% Organic Cotton” or “Made with Recycled Polyester” (Dickenbrok & Martinez, 2018; Papadopoulou et al., 2022). For example, H&M Group (2025) lists detailed material information and promotes the transition towards recycled and sustainably sourced fibres as a core competency of their strategy. However, critics note that these claims can be misleading if the percentage of recycled material is low or if the product is a blend that can no longer be recycled (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022; Niinimäki et al., 2020). Major retailers utilise dedicated frameworks and initiatives to categorise their sustainable offerings. For instance, H&M has implemented circular design criteria (H&M Group, 2023) and Shein has introduced the “evoluSHEIN” strategy to highlight preferred materials (SHEIN Group, 2025). Meanwhile, Inditex has shifted its focus toward a broader sustainability roadmap aimed at using 100% preferred fibres by 2030 (Inditex Group, 2025). Such initiatives serve to distinguish products with preferred attributes from the standard assortment, aiming to guide consumers through the complexity of sustainability claims (Dickenbrok & Martinez, 2018; Neumann et al., 2021). Communication often focuses on closing the loop (Alkkiomäki et al., 2024). Example of

this is H&M's recycling system "Loop", which promotes their global clothing collection initiative, where customers can return used clothing for reuse and recycling (H&M Group, 2020). Although these initiatives frame the brand as a circular enabler of the circular economy, they have faced scepticism regarding the actual destination of the collected clothing and the recycling rates (Brooks, 2015; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

Additionally, Kang and Hustvedt (2014) suggest that open communication about sustainability and labour practices, even when issues are complex or incomplete, strengthens brand credibility and persuasive consumer responses. Companies that communicate their sustainability practices transparently are therefore more likely to build strong consumer-company relationships and reduce scepticism toward their claims.

### **3 Cultural values shaping consumer perception of sustainability in fast fashion**

This chapter shifts the focus from the industrial context to the consumer perspective, exploring the theoretical frameworks that underline consumer behaviour. It first defines the concept of cultural values, with a specific focus on individualism and collectivism as outlined by Hofstede (2001) to understanding how consumers of such cultural contexts prioritise information and form judgements. Following this, the chapter examines the psychological processes of consumer perception and evaluation, analysing how individuals interpret sustainability efforts and how these interpretations are filtered through their cultural value system.

#### **3.1 Cultural values**

Cultural values, the collective beliefs, aspirations, and ethical standards shared within a society that guide attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions helps individuals interpret their social reality and make decisions within social contexts (Schwartz, 1999; Hofstede, 2001). According to Papadopoulou et al. (2021) values guide everyday choices, such as green product consumption, sustainable lifestyle adoption, and environmental advocacy by providing a moral and social framework for what is considered desirable or appropriate. As sustainable fashion options become more accessible, consumers increasingly use their purchases to express these underlying values.

Additionally, Niinimäki (2010) expressed that fashion consumption is also closely linked to cultural norms and aesthetic standards. Consumers often choose clothing that aligns with the ideals of their society, while also striving for social acceptance and approval through clothing considered appropriate and in good taste. At the same time, clothing functions as a means of expressing individuality, constructing identity, and communicating group belonging. Thus, cultural values influence not only what

consumers consider aesthetically appealing, but also how they balance the tension between personal expression and societal expectation.

Hofstede's (2001) model presents five main dimensions that define societal variation through culturally shared values and behavioural practices, including power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and long-term versus short-term orientation. These dimensions reflect how individuals within a culture engage with authority, manage uncertainty, define gender roles, and prioritise individual or collective interests.

The influence of cultural values becomes particularly evident when examining the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Van Hoorn, 2015). Hofstede's cultural framework (2001) highlights individualism and collectivism as key dimensions that shape people's relationship to society. These cultural orientations determine whether people prioritise autonomy and personal goals or group harmony and interdependence. While Hofstede's model provides the foundational definitions, culture is dynamic. As focused on this thesis, the individualism-collectivism dimension is central to understanding how consumers interpret sustainability communication and evaluate brand credibility. Understanding these cultural differences provides a foundation for exploring how sustainability perceptions and trust in corporate claims vary between individualistic and collectivistic cultural contexts.

### **3.1.1 Individualistic cultural values**

Individualistic cultures emphasise autonomy, personal goals, and the freedom to act according to one's own preferences. Individuals are encouraged to express themselves, pursue personal interests, and prioritise their own needs and rights over collective expectations (Hofstede, 2001; Matsumoto & Kupperbusch, 2001). This cultural orientation supports a variety of behavioural choices and a focus on present-oriented enjoyment, often without strong obligations toward broader societal or group responsibilities (Minkov et al., 2018). In these societies, typically associated with

Western countries (Matsumoto & Kupperbusch, 2001), environmentally conscious behaviour, such as choosing sustainable products, embracing environmentally friendly lifestyles, and supporting ecological initiatives, is often based on personal values and motivations, such as ethical self-expression or alignment with one's lifestyle (Papadopoulou et al., 2022). Consumers from individualistic contexts tend to evaluate sustainable products based on how they benefit the individual personally (Kim & Choi, 2005; Soye, 2012). Thus, sustainability-related decisions in individualistic contexts often reflect personal identity construction rather than collective duty (Kim & Choi, 2005; Niinimäki, 2010).

### **3.1.2 Collectivistic cultural values**

Collectivistic cultures prioritise group harmony, interdependence, and loyalty, emphasising the importance of aligning personal behaviour with group norms and expectations (Hofstede, 2001). Individuals are encouraged to conform to shared values, maintain social cohesion, and consider the long-term well-being of the community, which includes cooperation, conflict avoidance, and respect for tradition (Hofstede, 2001; Minkov et al., 2018; Matsumoto & Kupperbusch, 2001). In these contexts, behaviour is guided by obligations and responsibilities, and collective values reflect the individual's social perspective, which emphasises interpersonal connection and prioritises collective goals (Hofstede, 2001; Heinke & Louis, 2009). Collectivistic values highlight the interdependence between individuals and their social groups (Hofstede, 2001), making sustainability engagement more likely to be framed as shared responsibility and community well-being rather than personal expression (Kim & Choi, 2005). These cultural patterns are typically associated with non-Western, especially East Asian, societies (Matsumoto & Kupperbusch, 2001).

## **3.2 Consumer perception and evaluation of sustainability**

According to Solomon (2009), consumer perception describes the process through which individuals interpret, organise, and select information about brands, products,

and marketing messages to form judgments and attitudes. Its formation is guided by personal experiences, cultural values, and external influences, such as social norms or advertising (Solomon, 2009; Soyez, 2012). In the context of sustainability, this evaluation process is rarely purely rational as it involves a complex interplay of cognitive evaluations and affective responses (Niinimäki, 2010). Increasingly, consumers perceive sustainability as a central criterion in evaluating brands and their products (Soyez, 2012). According to Papadopoulou et al. (2022), sustainability not only influences purchasing decisions, but increasingly acts as a key factor enabling consumers to differentiate between brand options in crowded markets. However, this evaluation process is not uniform across cultures. According to Soyez (2012), cultural values act as a filter that shapes which aspects of sustainability are perceived as relevant.

As sustainability has become a mainstream consumer priority, individuals rely on their personal values, such as environmental concern, perceived consumer effectiveness, and social responsibility, to assess whether brands genuinely align with their expectations (Neumann et al., 2021). These value-based evaluations shape attitudes, trust, and eventually purchase intentions (Kang et al., 2013). However, as Niinimäki (2010) notes, evaluating sustainable fast fashion is particularly complex, because clothing is deeply tied to identity formation and social acceptance. Consumers navigate tensions between fashion-driven self-expression and ethical considerations, making sustainability judgements partly emotional and based on value.

Soyez (2012) suggests that consumers from individualistic cultures tend to evaluate sustainability through an eco-centric lens. Their evaluation often focuses on how sustainable practices benefit them personally, such as through improved product quality or health benefits. Consequently, the evaluation is often attribute-based, focusing on specific claims and facts. In contrast, Soyez (2012) suggests that consumers from collectivistic cultures often adopt a more social-centric approach. For them, the evaluation of sustainability is tied to social norms and group welfare. Therefore, the perception of a fast fashion brand is influenced by its reputation within the social group

and whether the consumption aligns with collective expectations (Soyez, 2012; Kang et al., 2013).

A significant challenge in this evaluation process is the credibility of information. Chen and Chang (2013) states that rapidly expanding sustainability communication has increased consumer exposure to environmental claims. While green advertising and sustainability messages permeate marketing communication, many claims remain vague, exaggerated or misleading, increasing scepticism toward brand initiatives known as greenwashing. Becker-Olsen and Potucek (2013) define greenwashing as the exaggeration of a company's environmental responsibility by investing more in promoting a green image than in implementing truly sustainable practices. It is based on highlighting individual positive actions to obscure broader negative environmental impacts, thereby presenting the brand as more sustainable than it is. Adamkiewicz et al. (2022) highlights that greenwashing has become a systemic issue in the fashion industry, where vague environmental claims often mask the reality of mass production. According to Chen and Chang (2013), when consumers suspect greenwashing, their trust in environmental claims and sustainable products declines significantly. This scepticism leads consumers to look for clearer signs of authenticity.

Consequently, consumers often support companies they perceive as socially responsible, but only when the brand seems reliable (Neumann et al., 2021). To navigate the uncertainty caused by greenwashing, consumers often seek for verification. According to Adamkiewicz et al. (2023), certifications, eco-labels, and transparent sustainability reporting can strengthen brand credibility. However, consumer reactions depend not only on the presence of this information but also on its perceived reliability and the company's actual practices. When sustainability efforts appear authentic and align with the consumer's cultural and personal values, they can enhance empowerment and strengthen favourable attitudes (Neumann et al., 2021; Soyez, 2012).

## **4 Cultural differences in consumer trust toward sustainability claims**

This chapter integrates the concepts of sustainability and cultural values link to consumer trust in the fast fashion context. It begins by defining the concept of trust and examining its specific application to environmental claims. Building on the cultural frameworks established in the previous chapter, the discussion explores how the mechanisms of trust formation differ between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Finally, the chapter synthesises these insights to discuss the consequences of trust on consumer attitudes and behaviour, specifically regarding responses to sustainability claims.

### **4.1 The concept of trust in sustainability context**

Trust is a fundamental base in building long-term consumer-company relationships. In marketing literature, trust is defined as the individual's willingness to rely on the reliability and integrity of an exchange partner (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), this confidence is combined with qualities such as consistency, fairness, helpfulness, and honesty. In the context of branding, reliability refers to the consumer's belief that a brand will satisfy their needs. Furthermore, trust means that consumers believe that a brand's actions are motivated by positive intentions for their well-being, and not solely by selfish motives (Munuera-Aleman et al., 2003).

The general concept of trust acquires specific nuances when applied to the context of environmental sustainability. Chen and Chang (2013) define trust as a consumer's willingness to trust a product or service based on the belief that it is reliable, benevolent, and environmentally functional. Accordingly, trust in this sustainability context is not only limited to the quality of a company's products but also includes the honesty of its environmental claims and performance.

In the fast fashion industry, this form of trust becomes particularly critical as consumers face unclear information. As noted by Chen and Chang (2013), when consumers faced with misleading or unclear sustainability claims, they are likely to perceive greater risk and consequently have less confidence in the markets. Furthermore, when consumers perceive sustainability labels as superficial environmental claims used primarily for marketing purposes or price premiums, consumer trust is significantly weakened (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). Therefore, reducing confusion and increasing clarity are essential requirements for establishing and maintaining trust (Walsh et al., 2007).

According to Kang and Hustvedt (2014), to overcome scepticism, the formation of trust relies heavily on transparency and perceived benevolence. They argue that a company's efforts to be transparent, especially regarding production and working conditions, directly impact consumer trust. Also, their findings suggest that consumers value honesty about difficult issues, such as factory conditions, even more than general charitable activities. When a company is perceived as transparent and socially responsible, it communicates benevolence, which in turn significantly contributes to positive outcomes, such as customer loyalty, purchase intention, and positive word-of-mouth (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014; Neumann et al., 2021).

#### **4.2 Trust formation across individualistic and collectivistic cultures**

Culture act as a lens through which individuals interpret information and decide whom to trust. Van Hoorn (2015) describes the difference between individualistic and collectivistic values through the concept of "radius of trust", referring to the range of people and institutions an individual is willing to trust.

According to Van Hoorn (2015), individualism is associated with a broad radius of trust. Individualistic cultures are characterised by the looseness of social ties, and individuals are accustomed to interacting with a diverse network of weak ties, including unknown and separate out-group members. Consequently, consumers in individualistic societies are generally more willing to extend their trust to out-group members, such as

unfamiliar companies or foreign brands, rather than reserving it only for their immediate circle. Often this type of trust is characterised as general trust, where individuals assume they are honest until proven otherwise (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). In the fast fashion industry, this broad trust radius implies that consumers are initially open to sustainability claims from global brands, even without a previous relationship (Van Hoorn, 2015; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). They approach sustainability communications with an assumption of honesty, expecting brands to comply with market regulations (Doney et al., 1998; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). However, this trust is fragile. Although they are willing to listen to new claims, they require communication to be logical and consistent to maintain trust (Chen & Chang, 2013; Doney et al., 1998).

In contrast, collectivism is associated with a narrow radius of trust (Van Hoorn, 2015). In collectivistic societies, individuals belong to strong, cohesive in-groups that protect them in exchange for loyalty (Hofstede, 2001). As Van Hoorn (2015) notes, this creates a sharper distinction between in-groups and out-groups. Trust is concentrated heavily within the in-group, including family and friends, while sceptical toward out-group members is higher. For companies, which are often viewed as out-group entities, gaining trust in collectivistic cultures is more challenging without established relationships or endorsements from within the consumer's trusted circle. This is a significant barrier for fast fashion brands operating in these markets. Standardised, impersonal sustainability campaigns are often viewed with scepticism (Dickenbrok & Martinez, 2018; Doney et al., 1998). To bridge this gap, sustainability communication must rely on social validation (Doney et al., 1998). Brands need to leverage in-group mediators, such as local influencers, or trusted community figures, to reinforce their ethical stance and transform the brand from an outsider to a trusted actor (Doney et al., 1998; Sun et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the formation of trust differs significantly between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Doney et al. (1998) suggest that in individualistic cultures, trust

formation is largely a cognitive, evidence-based process. Consumers rely on calculative trust, where they evaluate objective evidence, performance data, and institutional mechanisms such as laws, regulations, and certifications. If a brand provides credible information, for example an eco-label, an individualistic consumer is likely to trust it based on the system's reliability. Therefore, sustainability communication aimed to these consumers must be evidence-based and transparent (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014; Soyez, 2012). In the fast fashion sector, this means requiring third-party certifications, detailed supply chain audits, and concrete data on environmental impacts (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). Vague emotional appeals are less effective than hard facts that allow the consumer to cognitively calculate the credibility of the brand's claims (Doney et al., 1998; Soyez, 2012).

Conversely, in collectivistic cultures, trust formation is often an affective, relationship-based process (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994; Doney et al., 1998). In collectivistic cultures, trust relies less on impersonal institutions and more on benevolence, reputation, and shared values (Hofstede, 2001). Consumers look for signals that the company cares about the welfare of the group rather than just profit (Doney et al., 1998; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). Therefore, establishing trust requires demonstrating shared identity or having the brand validated by the in-group, rather than relying solely on external certifications (Doney et al., 1998). In the context of fast fashion, this implies that sustainability communication cannot be simply informative or data driven (Doney et al., 1998; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). Brands must go beyond technical product features to communicate their benevolence and commitment to social good (Doney et al., 1998; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). Effective strategies include highlighting corporate social responsibility initiatives, such as fair labour practices or community support programs, which demonstrate the brand's positive role within the society (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014; Kim & Choi, 2005). This approach fosters an emotional connection, assuring consumers that the brand is acting for the good of the group and not just for commercial gain (Doney et al., 1998; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014).

Through the perceptual process discussed in Chapter 3 and the trust mechanisms outlined above, it becomes apparent that cultural contexts determine which sustainability efforts effectively build trust in the fast fashion industry. For consumers in individualistic cultures, the perception of sustainability communication is often attribute-based and informational (Soyez, 2012). In the fast fashion industry, where greenwashing is a prevalent concern, these consumers rely on cognitive evaluation to distinguish genuine efforts from exaggerated claims (Chen & Chang, 2013; Doney et al., 1998). They frequently examine specific product attributes, such as the composition of the fabric, or the presence of eco-labels on clothing tags, as primary indicators of trustworthiness (Doney et al., 1998; Soyez, 2012). Thus, for individualistic consumers, the path to trust in fast fashion is linear, as accurate product information leads to cognitive clarity, which reduces scepticism caused by vague claims in the industry (Chen & Chang, 2013). Consequently, their evaluation is driven by a calculative process, where they weigh the personal benefits against the provided evidence (Soyez, 2012).

In the fast fashion context, this means that trust is established through transparency and verification (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). Since these consumers presume an unbiased relationship with the brand, they demand objective evidence to reduce the risk of greenwashing (Chen & Chang, 2013; Doney et al., 1998). This communication style is exemplified by H&M's sustainability reporting approach. The brand provides detailed supplier lists and enables customers to access specific factory data and material composition for individual products (H&M Group, 2025). By systematically sharing this information to enable full supply chain transparency, the brand's strategy directly appeals to the individualist consumer's need for verifiable data. For an individualistic consumer, this transparency serves as the primary signal of trustworthiness (Doney et al., 1998; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). If the data is perceived as accurate, trust is formed cognitively (Doney et al., 1998; Soyez, 2012).

In contrast, consumers from collectivistic cultures perceive sustainability communication through a holistic lens (Hofstede, 2001; Soyez, 2012). Because fashion

is a highly visible tool for impression management (Niinimäki, 2010), their evaluation is socially embedded (Soyez, 2012). They focus on whether the brand's behaviour aligns with group norms and whether the brand demonstrates benevolence toward the community (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). Therefore, trust is formed through social validation and reputation (Doney et al., 1998; Kim & Choi, 2005). External certifications matter less than the endorsement of the in-group or trusted intermediaries (Doney et al., 1998; Hofstede, 2001). Trust is significantly influenced by whether a fast fashion brand is perceived as a good citizen who respects community values, such as fair labour conditions (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). For a collectivistic consumer, the risk of doing business with a brand involved in social scandals is a threat to their social reputation (Kim & Choi, 2005). Trust is therefore created through social reinforcement, meaning that even if a fast fashion brand claims to be sustainable, trust is only formed if the overall image of the brand is in line with the ethical expectations of the group (Soyez, 2012).

In collectivistic markets like China, major fast fashion brands often rely heavily on opinion leaders and social platforms like WeChat to build trust, rather than just publishing technical reports (Sun et al., 2022). An opinion leader is a social media influencer who occupies a middle ground between celebrities and peers, establishing strong social connectedness through regular interaction and shared interests (Sun et al., 2022). If a trusted influencer or a social circle validates a brand for its community contributions or ethical standing, a collectivistic consumer is likely to transfer that trust to the brand (Sun et al., 2022). Here, trust is not built solely on the fibre content labels, but on the assurance that the brand is a respected member of society that will not cause the consumer to lose social reputation (Doney et al., 1998; Nam et al., 2017).

### **4.3 Consequences for consumer attitudes and behaviour**

Trust acts as a decisive filter that transforms abstract sustainability perceptions into concrete consumer attitudes and behaviours. According to Neumann et al. (2021), trust is a powerful mechanism that not only shapes general attitudes toward a brand but

significantly influences purchase intentions for sustainable clothing lines. When consumers perceive a brand's social responsibility efforts as genuine, it enhances their trust. This strengthens their perceived consumer effectiveness, which is seen as the belief that their individual consumption choices can have a positive environmental impact. Thus, trust empowers consumers to move from passive concern to active sustainable purchasing.

Chen and Chang (2013) states that consumers rely on corporate communications in decision-making, but greenwashing undermines trust in these communications. Without trust in corporate claims, consumers struggle with confusion and are unable to distinguish valid sustainable options from misleading ones. Recent findings by Meet et al. (2024) confirm that for modern consumers, perceived greenwashing acts as a significant barrier to purchase intention, overriding other marketing factors. As a result, greenwashing not only damages individual brands, but also jeopardises the credibility of the entire market for sustainable apparel by eroding consumer confidence (Chen & Chang, 2013). Reflecting on the cultural differences discussed in previous chapters, the behavioural consequences of trust manifest through different underlying motives (Kim & Choi, 2005).

In individualistic cultures, where trust is often cognitive and outcome-oriented (Doney et al., 1998), consumer attitudes toward sustainable fashion are often driven by self-expression and personal values (Kim and Choi, 2005; Niinimäki, 2010; Papadopoulou et al., 2022). According to Kim and Choi (2005), individualistic consumers engage into environmentally friendly purchases to demonstrate their unique identity and moral superiority. Consequently, when trust is established, the sustainable product becomes a vehicle for self-verification, confirming the consumer's view of themselves as a responsible individual (Soyez, 2012). However, because their trust is based on evidence, they are highly sensitive to factual inconsistencies (Doney et al., 1998; Chen & Chang, 2013). Therefore, the primary negative consequence of a breach of trust is internal dissonance or guilt, which may prompt the consumer to punish the brand by switching

to a competitor that better aligns with their self-concept (Kim & Choi, 2005; Soyez, 2012).

The case of H&M illustrates this consequence. Despite the brand's high transparency ratings, individualistic consumers lost rational trust when facts contradicted the claims (Kulalı Martin and Sancar Demren, 2024). According to Kulalı Martin and Sancar Demren (2024), data revealed that the H&M's "Conscious" collection contained a higher percentage of damaging synthetic fibres (72%) than the brand's ordinary collection (61%). Furthermore, a 2023 scandal involving geo-trackers proved that clothes collected for the "Let's close the loop" recycling initiative were often dumped in landfills rather than recycled. For individualistic consumer who rely on evidence, this objective proof directly invalidates the brand's claims and reduce trust.

In collectivistic cultures, where trust is relational and affective (Soyez, 2012), behaviour is more strongly influenced by social pressure and the need to maintain group harmony (Hofstede, 2001; Minkov et al., 2018; Matsumoto & Kupperbusch, 2001). Kim and Choi (2005) suggest that for collectivistic consumers, sustainable behaviour is often motivated by a desire to avoid negative judgement rather than to stand out. According to Nam et al. (2017), if a brand is widely trusted and recognised within the in-group, purchasing it reduces social risk and protects the consumer's social reputation. Therefore, the consequence of distrust is particularly severe in collectivistic markets. If a brand is perceived as unethical, association with it threatens the consumer's social status, leading to shame-driven avoidance behaviour rather than personal dissatisfaction.

In the fast fashion sector, the rise of green consumption in Asia can be understood through the lens of public visibility, a driver traditionally associated with luxury consumption in collectivistic cultures (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). A consumer might buy a visible eco-collection item to be seen as a responsible citizen by their peers (Kim & Choi, 2005; Nam et al., 2017). However, if a brand is involved in a social scandal, the

consequence is immediate avoidance behaviour (Nam et al., 2017). The consumer avoids the brand not necessarily due to personal guilt, but to avoid the shame of being associated with a socially stigmatised company (Hofstede, 2001; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Thus, in collectivistic markets, the loss of trust can lead to rapid, widespread boycotts driven by the need to protect social standing (Hofstede, 2001; Qu, 2024).

For instance, the decline of H&M in the Chinese market during the early 2020s illustrates this mechanism. According to Qu (2024), while H&M has established itself as a famous brand in China in the previous decade, its decision to cease sourcing cotton from Xinjiang due to forced labour allegations triggered a severe backlash. In a collectivistic context, H&M's stance, intended as a commitment to universal human rights, was interpreted as an aggression against national dignity. Unlike some competitors who chose to exit the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) to save their market share, H&M maintained its position. The consequence was a rapid, socially driven boycott. Qu (2024) notes that the trend of boycotting was significantly aroused by online celebrities, demonstrating the power of opinion leaders in collectivistic cultures. The social pressure was so intense that major platforms like Tmall and Baidu Maps removed the brand entirely to align with the government's position that businesses should not profit from the Chinese market while disseminating statements perceived by the authorities as unfounded misinformation. For the collectivistic consumer, associating with H&M became a social risk, leading them to switch to alternative brands like Uniqlo to protect their social standing.

Ultimately, trust is not a universal construct but is deeply embedded in cultural values. The divergence between cognitive trust formation in individualistic markets and affective trust formation in collectivistic markets explains why standardised sustainability communications often fail to resonate globally.

## 5 Conclusions

This chapter synthesises the key findings and final conclusions of the thesis based on the literature analysed. It begins by addressing the research questions, detailing how the individualism-collectivism dimension influences the perception, evaluation, and formation of consumer trust. Furthermore, the chapter discusses both theoretical and managerial implications for implementing culturally adaptive communication strategies within the fast fashion industry, concluding with recommendations for future research.

### 5.1 Findings

The main objective of this thesis was to examine *how consumers from individualistic and collectivistic cultural contexts perceive and evaluate sustainability efforts in the fast fashion industry*, and most importantly *how these differences influence their trust in fast fashion brands' sustainability communication*. By utilising Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, specifically the individualism-collectivism dimension, this thesis demonstrates that sustainability is not a universally understood concept. Instead, cultural values act as a fundamental filter through which consumers interpret and trust sustainability claims. To answer the research objective, three research questions were determined. The results are summarised below by answering each research question individually.

The first research question focused on *how consumers from individualistic cultural contexts differ from collectivistic cultures in their perception of sustainability communication of the fast fashion industry*. Regarding perception, our literature review shows a fundamental difference in how sustainability messages are processed. Consumers from individualistic cultures perceive sustainability communications through a rational, objectivist lens, viewing it as a technical product feature. In line with Soyez (2012), these consumers focus on specific informational details, such as material composition and carbon footprints, requiring clarity and distinctiveness. In contrast, consumers from collectivistic cultures adopt a holistic and context-dependent lens. They

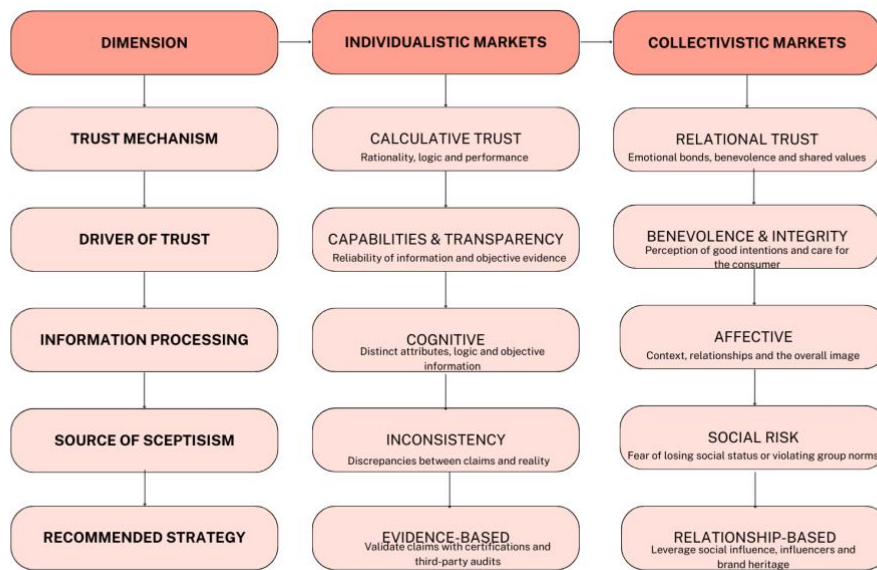
perceive sustainability as a part of a brand's broader relationship with society and the environment. As Hofstede (2001) and Kim and Choi (2005) suggest, perceptions and credibility are rooted in the brand's overall image, social harmony, and collective well-being, rather than isolated data points of technical specifications.

The second research question focused on *how consumers from individualistic cultural contexts differ from collectivistic cultures in their evaluation of sustainability communication of the fast fashion industry*. We find that these diverging perceptions influence the formation of trust by determining the distinct criteria used to evaluate credibility within each cultural context. Individualistic consumers evaluate sustainability through cognitive processing and factual consistency. Since their trust domain is broad but conditional (VanHoorn, 2015), they rely on institutional mechanisms and prioritise third-party certifications and factual accuracy. Any discrepancy between a brand's claims and the evidence, as illustrated by the H&M case regarding synthetic fibres, leads to a negative evaluation based on factual violation. In contrast, collectivistic consumers evaluate sustainability communication based on social validation and perceived benevolence, prioritising social validation from a trusted group over factual verification. This process relies on a transference mechanism, where trust is shifted from trusted in-group intermediaries, such as influencers, to the brand (Sun et al., 2022). Furthermore, the evaluation is related to brand reputation and corporate social responsibility initiatives are valued more than technical or impersonal data.

The third research question focused on *how the perception and evaluation of sustainability communication of consumers from individualistic and collectivistic cultural contexts influence their trust toward sustainability claims in the fast fashion industry*. Our literature review finds that for individualistic consumer, trust is formed cognitively. Trust is calculative based on the prediction that a brand will follow the rules and provide accurate information. This trust is fragile as it requires constant evidence and transparency. When factual inconsistencies emerge, such as greenwashing scandals, cognitive trust is shattered, leading to scepticism and a demand for stricter validation.

For collectivistic consumer, trust is formed affectively through social mechanisms and is relationship-based. It is based on certainty and the brand's reputation in the social network. Trust is maintained if the brand respects the values of the in-group and protects the consumer's social identity. However, the loss of trust in this context is a serious matter. If a brand offends collective dignity, as in the H&M boycott in Xinjiang, the result is not just scepticism, but immediate social avoidance to avoid shame (Qu, 2024). Thus, while individualistic trust is built on evidence, collectivistic trust is built on relationships and reputation.

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that standardised global communication strategies are ineffective due to these diverging cultural expectations. For fast fashion brands to successfully foster trust and promote sustainable behaviour, they must adopt culturally adaptive communication. This requires prioritising evidence-based transparency in individualistic markets while focusing on social harmony and reputation in collectivistic markets to align with the specific trust-building mechanisms of the target audience. The key differences between these cultural contexts are illustrated below in Figure 1, which presents a comparative summary of trust mechanisms and recommended communication strategies.



**Figure 1.** Summary of the thesis findings regarding trust mechanisms and communication strategies.

## 5.2 Managerial and theoretical implications

This thesis contributes to the existing literature on sustainable marketing and cross-cultural consumer behaviour by bridging the gap between cultural dimensions and trust formation in the fast fashion industry. While previous research has examined cultural values (Hofstede, 2001) and green purchase behaviour (Kim & Choi, 2005; Nam et al., 2017; Neumann et al., 2021), this thesis clarifies the underlying mechanism, specifically the radius of trust and information processing styles, that determines how these values translate into perception and evaluation.

Theoretically, the findings reinforce the validity of Doney et al.'s (1998) framework of trust formation by demonstrating its applicability to the modern fast fashion sector. The thesis confirms that trust regarding sustainability claims is not a universal construct; rather, it functions predominantly as a cognitive process (calculative trust) in individualistic cultures and an affective process (transference) in collectivistic cultures. Furthermore, the thesis extends the understanding of consumer scepticism toward greenwashing. In accordance with Chen & Chang (2013), it suggests that scepticism

arises not only from factually misleading information but also from a fundamental mismatch between the brand's communication style and the cultural trust mechanisms of the consumer. For marketing managers in the fast fashion industry, the findings imply that a standardised global sustainability strategy is ineffective and potentially damaging to brand credibility. Instead, managers should adopt a culturally adaptive approach that aligns with the specific trust mechanisms of the target market.

In individualistic markets, this requires prioritising a strategy based on transparency and evidence. Since these consumers employ a calculative trust mechanism (Doney et al., 1998), communication must be centred on verifiable evidence. Brands should invest in third-party certifications and display them prominently to satisfy the consumer's need for objective verification. Marketing messages should be logical, fact-based, and consistent to avoid accusations of greenwashing. Managers must be aware that any discrepancy between claims and reality can lead to an immediate cognitive breach of trust, as evidenced by the backlash against unsubstantiated sustainability claims (Kulali Martin and Sancar Demren, 2024).

In collectivistic markets, managers should prioritise a strategy based on social validation and benevolence. Since these consumers operate with a narrow radius of trust (Van Hoorn, 2015), direct communication from an outside-group corporation is often faced with scepticism. Brands must leverage the transference process by collaborating with local opinion leaders and trusted influencers who can validate the brand's ethical stance. Content should shift focus from technical specifications to corporate social responsibility and community well-being. Crucially, managers must protect the brand's social status by respecting national dignity and group values, as it is a prerequisite for maintaining market presence, as violations can trigger rapid, socially driven boycotts.

Ultimately, building trust in fast fashion requires a culturally adaptive approach. While the commitment to sustainability is global, the communication of that commitment must be localised to fit the cognitive or affective processing style of the consumer.

### 5.3 Future research suggestions

While this thesis provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding cross-cultural sustainability communication, future research is needed to validate these findings empirically. Since this thesis relied on a literature review, future studies should employ quantitative methods, such as consumer surveys or experimental designs, to test the proposed relationship between cultural values and trust formation mechanisms in real-world scenarios.

Although the theoretical link between cultural values and trust formation is well-established, the practical application in the fast fashion context requires further empirical validation. Furthermore, future research could expand the cultural scope beyond the individualism-collectivism dimension. Investigating other cultural dimensions, such as Uncertainty Avoidance, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of trust mechanisms. For instance, it would be valuable to study whether high uncertainty avoidance influences the need for specific types of evidence, such as third-party certifications versus peer reviews. Additionally, exploring visual versus verbal communication could determine whether high-context cultures respond better to implicit imagery compared to the individualistic preference for explicit information.

Finally, specific contexts of trust require further research. The mechanisms of trust recovery following a greenwashing scandal may differ significantly across cultures. Future studies could examine the effectiveness of social remorse in collectivistic cultures versus verifiable action in individualistic cultures. Moreover, the potential convergence of global consumer behaviour requires attention. Future research should examine whether the identified cultural differences remain significant in digital environments, or if a unified global digital culture is emerging that overrides traditional cultural values in the context of sustainability.

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