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**CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF  
SUSTAINABILITY MARKETING  
COMMUNICATION**  
A Comparative Study of Finland and Pakistan

Faculty of Management and Business

Master's Thesis

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# ABSTRACT

Michelle Arif: Consumer Perceptions of Sustainability Marketing Communication: A Comparative Study of Finland and Pakistan  
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Among rising sustainability concerns, businesses must reevaluate how to market their products and values to consumers. The field of sustainability marketing has evolved as a broader construct that encompasses more holistic issues i.e. sociological issues as well as ecological and environmental aspects. Thus, marketing not only generates value for companies and consumers but also for society at large. While sustainability marketing has gained increased interest, it is necessary to explore consumer perceptions to understand why messages are impactful for some audiences while leaving others unconvinced. These perceptions are not formed in a vacuum but are embedded in shared meanings, continually shaped through cultural interactions and social practices. There remains limited research on how shared cultural meanings shape the way customers perceive sustainability marketing, particularly outside Western context.

This research explores perceptions of sustainability marketing communication across two culturally distinct regions, to examine whether messages are context dependent and how consumers perceive these according to their values and perspectives. The aim of the study was to understand the role of culture in shaping consumers' perceptions of credibility and relevance in sustainability marketing communication across Pakistan and Finland. The cross-cultural comparative approach allowed for exploration of culturally specific and cross-cultural patterns that shape consumer perception. In doing so it sought to answer the research question: How does culture shape consumers' perceptions of credibility and relevance towards sustainability marketing communications from international brands in Finland and Pakistan? To answer this, the research draws on prior research on sustainability marketing communication, consumer culture, and Hofstede's 6 D cultural dimensions that are taken as a sensitizing framework further understood through shared meanings of credibility and relevance, through which consumers actively understand, evaluate, and respond to these sustainability marketing messages.

The study adopted a comparative qualitative research design with an underlying critical realist stance. Data was collected from four semi-structured online focus groups (two in Finland, two in Pakistan) with adults aged 20–40 regarding consumers' perceptions of Unilever's sustainability communications, particularly in digital and web content. The participants were selected through purposive and quota sampling, with a mix of sustainability-focused and neutral individuals. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis of the emerging patterns and themes. The findings revealed that both countries valued emotional appeals, local impact and detailed, honest and clear information supported by verifiable evidence. In terms of comparing perspectives individualistic/collectivism and power distance emerged as the two main dimensions shaping understanding of how consumers understood credibility and relevance along with socio-economic factors such as financial constraints, lack of education and access to awareness.

The research adds to the existing literature on cross cultural sustainability marketing communication by providing cross-cultural context and moving focus towards non-western cultures and the role of cultural values in shaping perceptions, it also expands on Hofstede's framework by utilizing it in an interpretive framework, addressing the critique for its deterministic nature. Ultimately, this thesis highlights the need for international businesses to develop culturally sensitive sustainability communications to appeal to diverse audiences. A central limitation that arose was that the study cannot be generalized due to small number of participants. This provides the backdrop for future research to include other countries across global north and south to study varying cultural settings.

Keywords: consumer perception, sustainability marketing communication, national culture, shared meanings, cross-cultural comparison

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background and research gap

A myriad of environmental and societal concerns impact the world we live in today, be it depletion of resources or global inequality, which results in businesses reevaluating how they promote products and communicate their values (Ur Rahman et al., 2021). This has led to increase in popularity in conjecture of the two terms “sustainability” and “marketing” among scholars and marketers in the last couple of years, as they aim to comprehend the connection between the two and how it relates to consumer behavior (Abutaleb & El-Bassiouny, 2020; Jung & Kim, 2023; White et al., 2025). According to Ailawadi et al. (2009) communication has a central role in any marketing strategy. In this context, marketing can be used to support and promote broader goals of sustainable development (Hunt, 2017). As a result, a company's mission, fundamental values, and guiding principles should all incorporate sustainability. The creation of marketing strategies, such as the marketing mix, should also be a part of this integration (Rudawska, 2019). Marketing material is often the consumer first point of exposure, and how consumer behavior unfolds is dependent on how consumers perceive the product or brand (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). The journey of consumer perception according to Hawkins and Mothersbaugh (2013) is “a process that begins with consumer exposure and attention to marketing stimuli and ends with consumer interpretation” (p. 272). In other words, what people do as consumers is often a consequence of how they see, understand, and evaluate the messages and cues that surround a product or brand.

Over the last two decades, the field has shifted from the early focus on green marketing toward a broader agenda for sustainable marketing. Sheth and Parvatiyar (2021) reflect on the development of green marketing into sustainability marketing, shifting from the narrow focus of environmental issues and economic development to more holistic issues, sociological issues as well as ecological and environmental aspects. Sustainability marketing is seen as a broader construct, as defined by Mittelstaedt et al. (2014) view it as not merely marketing but as a manner of generating value not only to the companies and consumers but also to society at large. This change has brought about a necessity for businesses to be more holistic when it comes to sustainability, keeping environmental social wellbeing at the core when promoting their offerings. According to Hunt (2017), marketing

must not be viewed as a mere tool in business but also an important factor toward attaining sustainable development.

Despite the growing body of literature on sustainable marketing the field remains underexplored as the concept has developed. This lack of theoretical depth and conceptual framing is evident in previous research and lacks applicability across contexts (Lunde, 2018). In previous studies, researchers have predominantly addressed the issues of promoting products that are eco-friendly, their distinctive features, and what kind of consumers purchase them (Borin et al., 2013). This limited comprehension promotes communication that is viewed unreliable, feeding into greenwashing claims (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020), contributing to lack of interest and skepticism among the consumers. With the rising academic and practical importance of sustainability marketing, together with evidence that consumer expectations vary depending on factors such as social, economic and psychological elements, suggests the need for further exploration. Falcão and Roseira (2022) and Narula and Desore (2016) have explored the role of these factors as they acknowledge the role of consumer segmentation, but the geographical and cultural aspect still remains lacking. This is further reflected in differing sustainable consumption behaviors across different national cultures (Minton et al., 2018). As Narula and Desore (2016) proposed there is need for further exploration of different aspects of consumer segmentation with emphasis on the inclusion of developing countries, to extend sustainability marketing communication research beyond Western contexts.

Although sustainability and the issues that surround this topic are well established, there is ongoing attitude behavior gap between the stated concerns of the consumers and their buying patterns (Munro et al., 2023). Although this gap is influenced by various factors including psychological, demographic, social, cultural, and brand marketing (Sukumaran & Majhi, 2024), it is necessary to analyze consumer perceptions to understand why messages are impactful for some audiences while leaving others unconvinced (Tan et al., 2016). These perceptions are often shaped in response to marketing materials and the cues embedded in those materials (Kachersky & Lerman, 2013; McDonald & Oates, 2006). This is gaining importance in the marketing sphere and has influenced increasing scientific attention to understand the interplay between businesses and sustainability marketing and its impact on consumer behavior (Berriain Bañares et al., 2021). Hence, it is fundamental that we add to this body of knowledge to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of this subject.

In addition to this general need, there is specifically cross-cultural concern. Previous research shows that marketing communications can be interpreted differently across cultures study (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010), this difference in interpretation might also be applicable towards sustainability communications, which may shape consumers' sense of connection, trust and response towards sustainability communications. These differences in response can be attributed to the differences in perception of information and behaviors across different cultures; for example, consumers in the West follow logical decision making, while collectivist, high uncertainty avoidance societies prefer subtle messages and respond more to relationship driven marketing where they feel first, then act and only after that they rationalize their choices (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011). This lack of applicability of universal approaches could be the reason why the adoption of sustainable behaviors such as recycling, less fuel use or waste segregation has not been as widely accepted in the Global South as it is in Western societies (Minton et al., 2018; Weder et al., 2025). This necessitates the understanding of the consumer base in developing and emerging markets, as they make up the world's largest and fastest growing consumer segments (London & Hart, 2004; Shankar et al., 2008).

Within cultural comparative studies concept of culture is often operationalized through dimensional models. For the purposes of this study, culture is approached as a patterned set of shared beliefs and norms among a given group of people. To define national cultural values specific to a culture, this study uses Hofstede's six-dimensional model, which reflects value orientations that are commonly observed within a particular geographical region (Hofstede et al., 2010). The dimensions as identified by Hofstede include individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term versus short-term orientation, power distance and indulgence versus restraint. These dimensions are utilized as sensitizing concepts for understanding how cultural factors may organize the lenses through which consumers interpret brand claims.

Because this thesis is specifically interested in how consumers perceive sustainability marketing communications, the study defines consumer perceptions as the ideas or beliefs consumers have as a result of how they view or comprehend sustainability marketing communications from international brands (Oxford Dictionary, 2021). Perceptions are not static. They arise along a process in which exposure and attention are followed by interpretation, through which audiences attribute meaning and evaluate a claim's importance for their own lives (Hawkins &

Mothersbaugh, 2013). Within this process, perceived relevance is the extent to which a consumer associates meaningfulness, alignment with needs, values or life context when encountering a message, advertisement or product (Jung, 2017). A message has higher relevance when its content and framing connect with what the audience already cares about or recognizes as salient, in ways that foster visibility and brand attachment (Jung, 2017). Perceived credibility is understood here as the degree to which brand communication is seen as honest, transparent, accurate and consistent with the brand's actions over time (Verleye et al., 2023). Credibility may be supported by cues such as detail, clarity and verifiable information, and instruments such as Lock and Seele's (2017) tool to assess the credibility of corporate social responsibility communications suggest that honest and data backed messages are deemed more trustworthy and can promote positive attitudes toward sustainable consumption. It is important to note that credibility is not only an individual judgment but also something that is shaped in interaction and through group norms, as people look to peers and their circle of influence in deciding what in a message is believable (Liang et al., 2024).

These perceptions of relevance and credibility of sustainability marketing communication are embedded in shared meanings. The study conceptualizes shared meanings in alignment with Fischer's (2009) proposition that culture is defined as a set of meanings held by a group of individuals. It understands that culture is constructed through social interactions, and is described as knowledge, beliefs, and values. Semiological approaches in marketing support this view that consumer culture functions like a shared web of meanings, found in social practices and continually shaped and reinforced through interactions among members of the group (Grace, 2021). This shared knowledge system also guides a community to make initial perceptions, decisions, and act in a way that is reflective of their culture (Shavitt & Barnes, 2020). This study relies on these perspectives to underscore that individual and group behavior can differ among different culture contexts depending on their shared understandings.

Bringing these elements together clarifies the core research problem. Existing cross-cultural work depicts linkages between culture and attitudes toward sustainable behaviors (Minton et al., 2012) and consumption of sustainable products (Chekima et al., 2016). Most studies are focused on Western and developed countries. Vighnesh et al. (2022) point out that most research on sustainable consumption has been centered on the Western context, while only very few focus on non-Western societies. Developing countries have a different social structure, norms and beliefs which can contribute to how they perceive communications. In countries like Pakistan, for

example, financial constraints lead to a restrained society (Hofstede Insights, 2022). Consumers prioritize product availability, usability and price over environmental or societal concerns and they do not like to indulge (Choudhury et al., 2019), making it harder for global sustainability messages to connect. These differences in value priorities and shared meanings can produce divergent perceptions of what counts as credible or relevant in practice.

The review of these studies presents an opportunity to further our knowledge of how perceptions of sustainability marketing communications are shaped across cultures. It is especially crucial outside the sphere of western influence to explore how different cultural groups perceive the credibility and relevance of these communications, as these perceptions may emerge differently across developed and developing countries.

This background establishes the importance of studying perceptions of sustainability marketing communication at the intersection of culture. The relevance lies in the fact that international brands routinely communicate similar claims across markets, and their messages may be interpreted in different ways, leading to varying levels of trust and engagement. Thus, this research explores whether sustainability marketing strategies that work well in one cultural setting can be effective in another, and whether the messages can be framed uniquely to fit different cultural contexts and to appeal to a mix of values and perspectives. Thus, this research explores the role of culture in varying perceptions of what is considered credible and relevant sustainability marketing communication across different cultural groups, such that international brands can frame their communication to appeal to a mix of values and perspectives.

## **1.2 Research objective and research questions**

This study provides an exploration of the role of culture in varying consumer perceptions of credibility and relevance in sustainability marketing communication across Finland and Pakistan. As sustainability marketing positions itself as an increasingly central consideration for many businesses, the ability to communicate sustainability in ways that resonate with diverse audiences has emerged both as a challenge and an opportunity (Ur Rahman et al., 2021). To this end, this thesis focuses on understanding the role of culture in shaping perceptions of credibility and relevance when exposed to sustainability marketing communication. Relevance and credibility contribute to the connect and resonance a consumer associates with sustainability marketing

communication, as they reflect perceived trustworthiness and personal meaningfulness (Jung, 2017). The perception are not univerrally held but can vary in different cultural settings, among different groups of people (Liang et al., 2024). Hence, considering cultural naunces in the sustianbiltiy marketing communication strategy provides a significant oppurtunity for golbal brands to connect with their diverse audiences and promote sustainable behavior by appealing to a range of consumer beliefs and social realities.

By positioning culture within sustainability marketing communication, this research addresses a critical point where global sustainability strategies meet localized cultural realities. Culture is a complex system of shared meanings that shapes the way people view and understand the world (Shavitt & Barnes, 2020). As culture is operationalized at a national level in this research it draws on Hofstede's six-dimensional model as a sensitizing framework, rather than a deterministic definition of culture (Hofstede et al., 2010). This framework allows for a deeper understanding of how cultural values shape preceptions. To address this the a comparative approach is adopted to understand how perceptions towards sustianbility marketing communication are shaped across Finland and Pakistan, two socio-culturally dictinct regions.

The main research question of this thesis is formulated as follows:

**Main research question:**

How does culture shape consumers' perceptions of credibility and relevance towards sustainability marketing communications from international brands in Finland and Pakistan?

Subsequently these sub-research questions were formulated to thoroughly address the proposed main research question.

**Sub-question 1:**

What are the differences and similarities between how consumers in Finland and Pakistan interpret relevance and credibility of sustainability marketing communications?

**Sub-question 2:**

What specific cultural and contextual factors help explain these differences or similarities in consumers' perceptions of sustainability marketing communication?

To answer the posed questions, the study will explore both culturally specific and cross-cultural patterns that help in understanding these variances in perception, this research takes a cross-cultural comparative approach. The thesis broadens the scope beyond west centered body of academic literature to include the global perspective into what makes sustainability marketing communication to be perceived as relevant and credible, and adds to the theoretical depth of existing literature on consumer perceptions in sustainability marketing. In doing so, the research adds to practical body of knowledge that international brands can lean on when communicating sustainable claims and initiatives to a global audience with different cultural values and lived realities.

### **1.3 Structure of thesis**

The thesis is organized into five main chapters. The first chapter, Introduction has provided background expanding on the focus of thesis as it addresses the key concepts integral to this research, research objective, and the resulting research questions.

Chapter 2 builds the theoretical foundation for this study. It explores the evolving concept of sustainability marketing with respect to culture and consumer perceptions. While building on the concept of relevancy and credibility in response to sustainability marketing. The chapter highlights how cultural values shape consumer attitudes and their understanding of sustainability-focused marketing. Next, the chapter introduces Hofstede's 6D model of national culture, which forms the theoretical framework for this study. It explores how cultural differences influence how consumers in Finland and Pakistan respond to marketing efforts related to sustainability, focusing on the cultural differences between these two countries.

Chapter 3 presents the methodological approach undertaken in this research, illustrates the research philosophy and design, and the data collection and data analysis methods utilized in this research. The methodological choices applied in this research are justified based on its comparative nature and the subject under research.

Chapter 4 presents empirical findings from four focus group interviews, two from Pakistan and two from Finland. Four main themes emerge from the data and are utilized to structure this chapter.

These themes focus on perceptions of credibility and relevance in relation to sustainability marketing communication, culture, and societal structures across both countries.

Chapter 5 concludes the study by providing an overarching summary of the entire study. The summary discusses findings in relation to the proposed research questions. Theoretical and practical contributions were also shared, and it ended by recognizing limitations and proposing further avenues for research.

## **2 Literature review**

The second chapter provides the theoretical base for this study, with the literature review examining how consumer perceptions intersect with culture and sustainability marketing communications. Section 2.1 introduces the concept of Sustainability Marketing, explaining its growing importance in business practices, with particular emphasis on how consumers evaluate credibility and relevance of this marketing communication. Section 2.2 shifts the focus to understanding culture, shared meanings and consumer perceptions. It also highlights the growing need for studies on sustainability marketing communication with a focus on emerging economies. Building on this, Section 2.3 introduces Hofstede's six cultural dimensions model and how they set the cultural narrative. This section constructs the cultural landscape of Pakistan and Finland to illustrate how distinct cultural values influence societal behavior and responses to sustainability marketing. Together, these sections provide a logical foundation for identifying the research gap and developing the framework of this study. Lastly, section 2.4 outlines the theoretical framework, exploring how national culture shapes consumer perceptions of sustainability marketing communication through Hofstede's cultural dimensions as a structural guiding point.

### **2.1 Sustainability marketing communications**

#### ***2.1.1 Global sustainability discourse and communication***

Sustainability has become a focus point for businesses, as they consider the implications of climate change and its impact on environmental degradation and economic inequalities (Hult et al., 2018; Kramer, 2020; Winston, 2019), positioning it as a core strategy and key management objective for companies and businesses (Kim & Hall, 2015). This change is a reflection that sustainability is no longer a distant concern but an urgent necessity that is shaped by not just the lived experiences of consumers but scientific evidence.

Early literature highlights the theoretical framework, including Beck (1992) where the concept of "risk society" points at how modern business operations have a necessity for environmental responsibility. The importance of openness and trustworthiness in business communications is a necessity, fundamentally shifting customer trust and expectations, emphasized by movements such Friends of the Earth (McDonagh, 1998). These developments show how there is a need to move

towards more responsibility driven and transparent sustainability marketing. Companies need to transition from traditional communication and provide marketing accountability.

Kemper and Ballantine (2019) call to clarify the definition of sustainability marketing considering these developments while addressing social and environmental changes. Several ideas have been developed reflecting these changes and what it means to practice sustainable marketing (Heath & McKechnie, 2019). It is also important to differentiate related ideas such as “green marketing” and “ethical marketing” from “sustainable marketing” that despite having shared roots hold separate meanings. “Sustainable marketing” tackles the trifold line of ecological, social and economic considerations rather than “Green marketing” which focuses on environmental problems and justifying their effects. It becomes a marketing approach, specifically a macro marketing approach that demands improvements for not only consumers but also producers, highlighting the concept of sustainable development (Belz et al., 2025). Going beyond the traditional marketing approach it has evolved from, sustainable marketing minimizes environmental harm which creates a long-term value for society and its consumers. This resonates with the more holistic description by Lunde (2018):

Sustainable marketing is the strategic creation, communication, delivery, and exchange of offerings that produce value through consumption behaviors, business practices, and the marketplace, while lowering harm to the environment and ethically and equitably increasing the quality of life (QOL) and well-being of consumers and global stakeholders, presently and for future generations. (p. 94).

Therefore, the definition of sustainability marketing put forward by Lunde’s (2018) is adopted by this study. It highlights both well-being and ethical responsibility, which corresponds well with this research’s focus on cross-cultural perceptions of sustainability messages. This study frames the meaning of sustainability by focusing on cultural standards and anticipations which influences how customers react to marketing communication in different scenarios. It does this by framing sustainability marketing as a value-driven and ethically grounded process.

As stated by McDonagh and Prothero (2014), marketing creates a major effect on whether sustainability measures are successful or not. They criticize mainstream marketing tendency that

prioritizes product sales over dealing with real environmental problems. Their review on existing marketing research shows that some scholars even say marketing research often ignores deep self-reflection and sticks to popular trends rather than real change. Hence, often companies' sustainability communications addressed towards their consumers come off as exaggerated and fabricated, which is termed as greenwashing by a brand (Bingaman et al., 2022).

The integration of sustainability into marketing strategy requires businesses to align their operations and communications with sustainable development principles. Martin and Schouten (2014) research the credible promotion of sustainable consumption and a culture based of sustainable development principles through a focus on sustainable marketing strategies. To achieve it businesses, need to include environmental, economic, and social issues in their strategic marketing planning for sustainable marketing to be impactful. As a part of this process each variable in the marketing mix needs to have target-market selection, objective setting, tactical and strategic decisions (Singh & Abidi, 2021).

Furthermore, sustainable marketing communication has emerged as a vital component in shaping consumer perceptions. According to Vredenburg et al. (2020), consumers increasingly expect brands to have a strong public standpoint on important societal and environmental issues. In the present day, consumers determine the market and have an effect on business operations, holding organizations liable for their social, political and diversity policies along with their ecological practices (Schmitt et al., 2021). Brands have strongly emphasized promoting a positive brand reputation that contributes to societal and environmental good in accordance with the rising consumer preference for brands to become more sustainability oriented (Sun et al., 2020). When genuinely pursued this association can substantially boost socially conscious consumer's confidence and brand devotion.

As consumer awareness of sustainability grows, businesses are increasingly expected to align their marketing strategies with authentic and socially responsible practices. This highlights how crucial it is for companies to be authentic and adjust their marketing strategies to fulfill changing consumer preferences. This will enhance the relationship by efficient and accountable communication techniques for measurable growth. This efficiency and accountability can also further build trust and credibility in the communication presented to the consumer.

### ***2.1.2 Credibility and trust in sustainability communication***

Credibility is defined as the perceived trustworthiness of the information provided, often influenced by the kind of practices and communication the company has been adopting and their long-term impacts (Verleye et al., 2023). This is where the role of communication comes into play to build legitimacy and trust among all stakeholders (Crane & Glozer, 2016). Previous studies associate credibility with positive influence on consumers and their actions (Jäger & Weber, 2020; Verleye et al., 2023), while failure of credible perceptions can lead to weak impact on their behavioral intentions (Chen, 2010). Credibility determines the confidence a consumer has in accuracy and integrity associated with a piece of sustainability communication and when this confidence fails it can lead to skepticism and mistrust (Lock & Seele, 2017). A common source of consumer mistrust arises in the form of greenwashing and, more recently, SDG (sustainable development goals) washing, which encompasses both environmental and societal claims (del Río et al., 2024). Greenwashing is widely recognized and has been defined as “communication that misleads people into adopting overly positive beliefs about an organization’s environmental performance, practices, or products” (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015, p. 226). Similarly, SDG washing is understood as the selective disclosure, promoting only positive impacts towards certain SDG goals while remaining silent on their negative impact towards other SDGs (Ferrón Vílchez et al., 2022). This means that while a company may highlight its contributions to climate action (SDG 13) or gender equality (SDG 5), it might simultaneously engage in practices that harm labor rights (SDG 8) or environmental ecosystems (SDGs 14 & 15). For example, a country’s national culture might be more concerned with labor rights than climate action. If global companies fail to consider this, their efforts may come across as manipulative, minimal, or irrelevant to that society.

Delmas and Burbano (2011) address the root of greenwashing, linking it to market pressure, weak regulations, and short-term profit incentives. Their framework focuses on structural issues in governance and regulations at the corporate level leading to greenwashing, instead of it being just an ethical issue. This could be from a lack of internal resources, market pressure, or accountability structures to implement sustainable practices, resulting in them promoting invalid claims to maintain their image in the public eye. As a result, businesses face consumer skepticism, and such practices can result in public backlash and harm brand equity. This makes it crucial for businesses

to be fully invested in their sustainable marketing communication to build a credible image for the customer (Lock & Seele, 2017; Szabo & Webster, 2020).

Misleading sustainability claims such as greenwashing and SDG washing have raised concerns about how consumers respond to these misleading practices, it is useful to consider findings from recent empirical studies. From the consumer point of view, Szabo and Webster (2020) researched the outcomes of greenwashing and proclaiming false claims, emphasizing that it was hard for companies to regain consumer trust once the consumer felt misled. This creates a gap between the consumer and the brand, as the expectations are not met because of the mismatch between action and communication, resulting in depreciating interest. Further research shows that fragmented communication or selective disclosure is a major reason for this mistrust (Vollero, 2022). According to Vollero (2022) selective disclosure is when a company to portray a positive image discloses only their successes, while staying silent about any negative aspects. In this way the truth is not hidden but bent. When companies fail to clearly communicate their actual environmental and societal impact, consumers become doubtful and are less likely to trust them again.

This loss of trust makes it tough for companies to rebuild their reputation and can hurt them in the long run. Supporting this, the research by Rausch and Kopplin (2021) reveals that consumers are highly unlikely to buy again from vendors that withhold information about negative impact or spread false information. This suggests that inadequate or dishonest claims are not limited to immediate reactions but can create a distance in the long run between brands and consumers, especially in cultures where trust is vital. By understanding how trust and credibility function in different cultures can help us gain further insight into minimalizing the effects of greenwashing and rebuilding consumer confidence. Along with credibility, the personal resonance and meaningfulness of a message also promote connectivity and help promote how the consumers interpret sustainability communication from a business.

### ***2.1.3 Relevance and resonance of sustainability marketing communication***

Communication often begins with the attention to connect with the audience it is generated towards (Gouda & Halim, 2025). This connection can be described in terms of relevance and resonance. Ruthven (2021) describes relevance as the process of finding certain information matching an

individual's need and expands it by leaning on research by Albassam and Ruthven (2018) and Tsai-Youn (2018) that describes criteria to help explain this need, such as situational relevance, which is an important consideration in diverse contexts. Resonance, on the other hand, considers the emotional and cognitive connection an individual builds in response to certain information that further reinstates their existing beliefs, values, and needs, resulting in information retention (Ruthven, 2021).

Establishing connections with consumers has been a focus point for brands, where they try to appeal through familiar values or emotional appeals that relate to the consumer (Casais & Pereira, 2021; Stevens, 2018). Designing communication with this intent allows brands to gauge public attention and promote internalization of the message such that it is remembered over a long period of time (McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011). According to Hartmann et al. (2005), emotional appeals are slightly more effective in leaving an impact when it comes to environmental responsibility rather than purely functional appeals, although combining both has the most overall impact. However, the optimization of emotional and functional appeals can vary across different consumer groups, as shown in research by Albers-Miller and Royne Stafford (1999) shows that Taiwanese a collectivist society favors ads with emotional appeals, while USA a more individualistic society favors pragmatic communication in ads. Kim et al. (2020) recognizes the heterogeneity of consumers and the need for unique tailored content depending on the social context and the target audience.

When considering sustainability communication and its perceptions, it is suitable to consider situational, emotional and cognitive connect to fully understand how sustainability can be communicated to consumers meaningfully (Belz et al., 2025). According to Belz et al. (2025), there are three factors that shape this alignment to induce action. The first one is "values" that is defined as an individual's responsiveness to different social or environmental issues, depending on what they deem important. Secondly, "beliefs" that a community or an individual holds about what is true, irrespective of all the evidence presented to them. One such belief is one's ability to make any impact at an individual level; this can be described as perceived personal relevance. However, there is also shared responsibility where there is collective concern over certain sustainability issues. Lastly, there is "attitude" which is shaped by values, beliefs, and one's lived experiences, such as the sustainability issues that directly impact them.

## 2.2 Culture and sustainability marketing communication

### 2.2.1 Culture and shared meanings

Human and social sciences struggle to define culture in a unified manner (Hall, 1997). Culture can be at times difficult to comprehend because depending on the context and perspective it can have different meanings, for some it is traditions and culture, but for others it can be shared beliefs and values or the way people communicate and interact (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). Cultural and social identity constructs have often been examined through well-developed frameworks throughout academic research, including Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, Schwartz's Value Theory (Schwartz, 1992), and Social Identity Theory (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015). Some of these take a more nationalistic approach while others focus on more individualistic traits. Schwartz's Value Theory explores universal human values that influence individual motivations and decisions, while Social Identity Theory focuses on how group membership and social categorization shape self-concept and behavior. In contrast, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions emphasize measurable differences in national culture across societies through dimensions such as power distance and individualism–collectivism. While all three contribute to understanding cultural behavior, Hofstede's model remains one of the most well-established, comparative framework for analyzing how cultural contexts (Steenkamp, 2001).

Culture is also understood as a process that exists through social interaction, as seen from the perspective of symbolic interactionist. where individuals are exposed to influence from others and their surroundings (Griswold, 2013). Hall (1997) notes that within cultural studies culture is often defined as a set of practices that emerge through creation and exchange of meaning between a group of individuals and cannot be defined in tangible terms like art or music. These shared meanings shape the way an individual chooses to interpret the world, if two individuals share similar interpretation of the world, they are from the same culture group (Hall, 1997). However, the scholar recognizes that culture is not necessarily uniform and can occasionally vary across members of society. Research in cultural psychology and consumer behavior shows that shared meanings act as mental guides, helping people make sense of their experiences and choices (Wänke, 2008).

As per Schiffman and Kanuk (2010) there are three significant pillars that shape a culture, it is the beliefs, values and customs. According to them the way consumers in a particular society behave can be linked to these key variables. Moreover, culture is intertwined with human psychology, leading their thought process and assessment of how they interact. Schiffman et al., (2008) bring up three different forms of cultural learning identified by anthropologists. The first one is formal learning based on your family teachings and surrounding adults, the second one is informal learning where the child copies behavior of close adults, family, friends and even television heroes. Then lastly, there is technical learning given by teachers and educators in a classroom environment, where students are given a blueprint of what should be done, why it should be done and the way it should be done. This highlights that cultural understanding is built through social interactions as we move through life.

However, even though culture is shaped through surroundings and lived experiences, their impact may depend on the individual's reasoning process and how they make sense of it (Hong et al., 2000). This is further supported by Archer (1995) who posits the dynamic nature of shared meanings as they are formed through human agency, such that they can be interpreted, reinforced and challenged. Geertz (1973) similarly conceptualizes culture as a system of symbolic shared meanings through which individuals construct meaning, but even though these are shared systems, meaning and interpretation can vary from individual to individual. Similarly, Mingers and Standing (2017) suggest that even though meaning is interpreted through shared understanding, these meanings are open to individual variation depending on one's experiences and context. According to the social identity theory, this information evaluation occurs based on their group identity, encouraging similar behaviors (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This shared social identity dictates how consumers behave and the marketing that they find persuasive, depending on their values and identity of the group the consumer belongs to (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015). Literature therefore builds the understanding that culture is a system of shared meanings, produced through social interactions and shapes the way we perceive and understand information.

### ***2.2.2 Culture and perception of sustainability marketing communication***

Consumer perceptions refer to how individuals interpret, understand, and form opinions about a product, brand, or marketing message based on their personal experiences, cultural background, and beliefs (Kotler & Keller, 2016). These perceptions shape how consumers evaluate product

quality, trust brand claims, and make purchasing decisions (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Since it determines how effectively messages resonate with target audiences and influence their attitudes and behaviors it becomes important to study and understand consumer perceptions (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019).

To value such perceptions in cross-cultural context, it is necessary to take into consideration how cultural structures influence the individual perception of marketing communications. Although the consumer journey metaphor outlines the phases by which an individual develops brand affinity or attains positive purchase experiences, it is important to note that the configurations of these phases are more or less different depending on the culture, which can be perception-attitude-behaviour (Shavitt and Barnes, 2020). As Yanez Arteta et al. (2025) explain, any company with a strictly individualistic approach to the international market, without having extensive experience with other cultures, will become trapped in a limited perspective that is parallel to their own cultural suppositions, which may result in a lack of understanding of possible other points of view.

This highlights the fact that culture is a core guiding factor on how people think, see and react to diverse situations including consumer behaviour. By understanding this, the need to understand how culture contributes to the development of trust and credibility is heightened even more. The Indonesian notion of *gotongroyong* that Abdulrazak and Quoquab (2018) propose emphasizes on common good and assistance. It implies that instead of having a predominantly self-interest and purely rationalistic deliberation as the main driver, marketers ought to preempt the social and psychological merits of sustainable practice, thus attracting consumers in the new markets and securing a long-term commitment towards sustainability efforts.

Similarly, study by Choudhury et al. (2019) signifies that there can be strong influence of underlying factors such as trust, community recommendation and necessity on consumer decisions, particularly among those at the bottom of the pyramid. These findings reinforce the idea that in many societies, especially in the Global South, trust is built through relational and communal connections rather than abstract messaging or technical proof.

Building further on cultural factors, a study by Soni et al. (2024) takes India as the case culture showing that by taking specific themes from SDG that align with Indian traditional culture such

as frugality, natural resource conservation, and community well-being may lead to positive response towards marketing communication. Soni et al. (2024) suggests to global brands looking to expand and grow in India to focus on traditional themes that highlight simple living, reuse and recycle, and saving resources so that the audience can relate to their message. According to them using familiar stories and cultural images in ads can help international brands connect better with Indian consumers. By showing how their products blend modern lifestyles with traditional values, global companies can build trust and create lasting relationships with Indian customers. This aligns with the need for adaptive marketing based on cultural contexts.

This shows that culture affects how people see products and brands, shaping their opinions and choices. Previous research shapes this phenomenon, attempting to unravel the role of culture in consumer decision making and behavior in culturally distinct regions (De Mooij, 2010; Faraoni et al., 2021; Rehman, 2021). These studies highlight that culture and values are inseparable cultural frameworks that define the values that shape consumer motivations, trust, and attitudes toward sustainability across societies. Groups of individuals who are raised or have been living within the same culture for a prolonged period often tend to have a similar set of values, social practices and beliefs which guide their way of thinking, behavior and making decisions (Gvili & Levy, 2019; Zhong et al., 2019). This influence of culture goes on to shape how people interact with brand and products and shape their overall consumption preferences (Chang et al., 2010). According to Koski (2023) national cultural values play a big role in shaping marketing strategies, influenced by marketers' views and business decisions. Companies can adapt their marketing to fit the local culture, use the same approach worldwide, or combine both strategies in a method called localization, balancing local adaptation with global consistency, making marketing materials influenced by the cultural context. Country culture influences how consumers perceive products and how they make decisions.

In the context of emerging markets like Southeast Asia, consumers base their purchasing and brand-related decisions on communal preferences and societal bonds (Minton et al., 2018). Such collective orientations often mean that emotional and social factors play a stronger role than rational evaluation when choosing products or brands (Sarkar, 2014). The emotional attachment extends to how consumers identify with brands that represent their social groups or communities. When they see a brand or product as reflecting the values of their in-group, they are more likely to

support, purchase from, and remain loyal to it (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015). Conversely, when a brand is associated with an out-group one, they do not relate to or even oppose consumers may avoid it or form negative attitudes toward it.

Many non-Western cultures depend on collective motivations to shape consumer behavior by adapting a holistic style of thinking with an emphasis on context and relationships, such as conforming to existing norms and expectations, rather than individual preferences (Shavitt & Barnes, 2020). According to the study conducted by Pantano (2011), the impact on perceptions can come up in the form of cultural relevance and authenticity, and marketing strategies may benefit from leveraging cultural associations. In the West however primarily, United States, Canada, and much of Western Europe, these nations score high on individualism. Consumers in these cultures prioritize personal choice, independence, and self-expression (Hofstede et al., 2010). Research shows that brands that focus on being unique, offering personal benefits, and helping them improve themselves are highly favored in Western countries (Shavitt et al., 2006). Stories of self-enhancement, individual success and personal aspirations often do well as core of marketing campaigns in these cultures. A study by Chang, (2012) builds on this where they compare story telling in advertisements across Taiwan and US, they found that in US these stories focus on self-related benefits, whereas in Taiwan they are focused on collective problem solving. Another common trait in Western cultures is short term orientation, where consumers seek instant results and gratification (Hofstede et al., 2010). This means that they respond positively to marketing communications that promote the here and now such as discounts and quick results (Bearden et al., 2006). This contrasts with countries with long term orientation that react on long term impacts and favor strategic brand relationships (De Mooij, 2019).

This shift in cultural perceptions necessitates international brands, and indeed any organization operating across diverse markets, to adopt culturally tailored marketing communications. This is because cognitive responses to information vary depending on the cultural contexts activated by one's surroundings and lived experiences. Recognizing these differences provides theoretical foundation for examining how national culture shapes consumer perceptions and responses to marketing messages. In the next section, this foundation will be applied to the context of sustainability marketing communications, where message effectiveness, credibility, and trust are deeply influenced by culturally anchored perceptions.

### 2.2.3 Overview of key studies on consumer behavior and culture

A higher proportion of research on consumer behavior remains focused on the developed world without fully considering the culturally diverse markets in the emerging world (Vighnesh et al., 2022; Kutaula et al., 2024). This builds on the need for further research on consumer values and perceptions across cultures, which helps build a narrative on the existence of the cultural influence on consumers in culturally distinct regions. Table 1 presents a synthesis of studies on consumer behavior across diverse cultural settings.

**Table 1.**

#### *Key studies on Culture and Consumer Behavior*

<b>Study</b>	<b>Conceptualization</b>	<b>Research Design</b>	<b>Problematization</b>	<b>Contribution (Findings)</b>
De Mooij and Hofstede (2011)	Uses cross-cultural consumer behavior framework, where cultural values are defined using Hofstede's dimensions	Review of existing cross-cultural research using Hofstede as analytical lens	Consumer behavior theories and measurement tools are based on western assumptions	Consumer behavior patterns are explained through Hofstede cultural dimensions and can be used to adjust global marketing and branding strategies.
Sarkar, A. (2014)	Weighs in on attachment to brands led often by irrational and emotional behavior and sometimes even rational in the context of emerging markets in Asia.	Qualitative study with semi-structured interviews (600 respondents across India).	Attachment and brand love have been mainly qualitatively studied in Western contexts while overlooking emerging economies and varying psychological drivers that promote brand attachment.	Brand love was found to be promoted by companies evoking emotions in relation to a product, overcoming strong focus on utility in developing countries.

<p>Abdulrazak, S., &amp; Quoquab, F. (2018)</p>	<p>Uses self-determination theory to explore motivations for consumers to practice sustainable consumption in developing countries.</p>	<p>Qualitative study with in-depth interviews in a developing country context.</p>	<p>Lack of research exploring the psychological motivations behind sustainable consumption in non-Western, developing countries.</p>	<p>A need for bonds and communal support was identified as a motivator for sustainable consumption among consumers. If sustainable consumption supports societal well-being it is more likely to be adopted.</p>
<p>Minton, E., Spielmann, N., Kahle, L. R., &amp; Kim, C. H. (2018)</p>	<p>Aims to find connectivity between national cultural values towards perception of sustainability which in turn impact sustainable consumer behaviors.</p>	<p>Qualitative, cross-cultural exploration across France, US and Japan.</p>	<p>Limited research on the role of national culture and practical influences on sustainable consumption</p>	<p>The study identifies that both a country's level of long-term orientation and sustainability attitudes mediate the resulting sustainable behaviors</p>
<p>Shavitt &amp; Barnes (2020)</p>	<p>The role of cultural dimensions in shaping consumer journey (individualism vs. collectivism), thinking styles, and power distance beliefs.</p>	<p>Literature review of cross-cultural studies in retail contexts.</p>	<p>Lack of academic acknowledgement of culture's role in existing consumer journey models. Mostly West focused research.</p>	<p>Found Hofstede's cultural dimensions shape retail behaviors that can vary across cultures and impact how cultures shape consumer decision-making.</p>

Al Zubaidi, N. (2020)	Considers Hofstede's dimension with Mediators stemming from the theory of reason-action	Quantitative research studying mediation	How collectivist culture shapes green purchase has not been studied in the context of Arabic countries	Collectivism was positively associated with green purchase intention, mediated through subjective norms, and attitudes.
Kutaula, S., Gillani, A., Gregory-Smith, D., & Bartikowski, B. (2024)	Ethical consumerism in emerging markets, focusing on Brazil, China, India, and South Africa.	Thematic literature review and synthesis of studies in a Special Issue.	Developed markets take precedence in existing research, often overlooking the dynamics of ethical consumption in emerging economies.	There is increasing sustainable consumerism in emerging markets shaped by cultural, economic, and social factors. Studies in this SI highlight significant differences in ethical consumption patterns across countries, reflecting the unique influence of local contexts and cultural factors.

To provide an overview of how cultural dimensions and consumer behaviors have been conceptualized across prior studies, Table 1 portrays previous literature examining the relationship between culture and consumer behavior, to show how this body of knowledge has developed. To better understand how culture influences consumer behavior across emerging markets, this synthesis highlights how each study conceptualizes culture and consumer behavior, identifies the

research design and problematization, and outlines their main contributions, thereby offering a structured basis for comparison and shows development of this domain.

Reviewing literature, Hofstede's dimensions emerge as a foundational theory to explain cultural values and resulting behaviors among consumers (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011), identifying the need for companies to move away from primarily western contexts to include non-western cultural backgrounds. This shifting focus towards non-western studies is reflected in Sarkar's (2014) research studying brand love in emerging markets, revealing how consumers from this market shape this attachment. Emerging countries valued utility yet depicted high emotional connectivity based on family and societal relevance. The non-western context is further explored by Abdulrazak and Quoquab (2018), where they recognize a gap in sustainability research regarding psychological motivators that drive sustainable consumption in developing countries, these motivators were found to be communal wellbeing and societal benefits.

These studies develop the need for increasing focus on cross-cultural contexts for inclusion of developing countries and consumerism. Minton et al. (2018) studied sustainable behaviors across France, Japan and US focusing on national cultural value, Long-term orientation. The findings of the research showed that national culture played a key role in driving sustainable behavior in a community. These cultural dimensions were then further applied to understand how consumer journey evolved differently across collectivist and individualistic societies (Shavitt & Barnes, 2020), taking into consideration other Hofstede's dimensions as well. These dimensions were found to impact pre-and-post purchase decisions and commitment after purchase, showing the journey considerably varied across cultures. The focusing on Jordan another country with collectivist society was studied by Al Zubaidi (2020) who found that consumers are more inclined to make green purchases if it means promoting communal wellbeing. Combined, these studies indicate that sustainable consumerism materializes differently across cultures. Recent research by Kutaula et al. (2024) chooses to specifically focus on emerging markets addressing the imbalance between Western and Non-Western studies when it came to ethical consumerism, including pro environment and social purchases and behaviours by conducting a thematic comprehensive literature review of existing studies expanding on the knowledge and limitations in this research area. Given the established need for research on sustainable consumerism research in emerging countries this thesis study takes a cross-cultural approach to understanding the perceptions that

guide consumers in collectivist countries such as Pakistan in comparison to an individualistic society.

## **2.3 Hofstede's cultural dimensions and their implications for consumer's perceptions of sustainability marketing communication**

### ***2.3.1 Hofstede's cultural dimensions and cross-cultural context***

Hofstede (1980) studied over 100,000 IBM employees from 40 different countries and shared his findings that uncover the value dimensions that differentiate cultures around the world. Hofstede's cultural dimension (1980) framework explains and explores the cultural influences that can have impact on perceptions and decision-making ability of consumers, that is why it has been widely adopted by studies on international marketing and consumer behavior (Lautenschlager et al., 2024; Soares et al., 2007; Taras et al., 2010). It is important to note that Hofstede's dimensions are adaptable and hence can be applied through adapted instruments designed to measure these dimensions in the context of marketing and consumer perceptions rather than just direct measurement of scores (Lu et al., 1999).

The framework however has been criticized for its limitations, such as taking culture as a homogenous and static in nature, and that it may have low generalization ability given that it was originally based on one multinational corporation (Mc Sweeney, 2002; Minkov & Hofstede, 2011). Some researchers also criticize that it fails to include globalization and regional diversity with a nation, failing to take into account the dynamic nature of culture, not addressing the variation across the studied population (Taras et al., 2010). Even though it has been critiqued, it demonstrates its practical application and lasting relevance in its repeated utilization in international marketing, cross-cultural and consumer behavior research (Kirkman et al., 2006; Rehman, 2021; Routamaa & Brandt, 2008; Shavitt & Barnes, 2020). Table 2 describes Hofstede's cultural dimensions and their associated meaning to explain the context in which these dimensions are considered in scientific study.

**Table 2.***Hofstede's Dimensions and their meaning*

<b>Cultural Dimension</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Individualism/collectivism	The extent to which a society conforms, relies on and prioritizes groups.
Uncertainty Avoidance	The need for organized strategies and structure. It recognizes how a society deals with risks and unexpected events.
Power Distance	Seen as deference to hierarchical authority and the existence of income class divide
Masculinity/Femininity	The extent to which a society favors equality, care and balance between ambition and wellbeing
Long Term/Short term Orientation	It is described through a focus on savings/investment and future prioritization, or quick results and living in the moment.
Indulgence-Restraint	This is related to approach to human enjoyment and practicing control or leaning into gratification.

*Note.* Adapted and synthesized from (Hofstede, 1980) and (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Initially, Hofstede (1980) put forth four key cultural dimensions that were individualism vs. collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and masculinity vs. femininity. Later, there was addition of two more dimensions that were long-term orientation and indulgence vs. restraint (Hofstede et al., 2010). These dimensions, as shown in Table 2, help compare how different cultures influence people's values and behaviors (Taras et al., 2010). To fully understand how these dimensions materialize in observable differences, further elaboration is needed.

***Individualism vs collectivism***

Collectivist societies value high-context communication where the style of communication is indirect, which assists in developing trust and bond between parties. While in individualistic societies the communication style is more direct and straightforward (Mooij and Hofstede, 2010). Consumers from collectivistic cultures frequently consider their identities as linked to their interactions with others, particularly inside their in-groups (Song et al., 2018). As a result, the

congruence effect is expected to be stronger in these cultures. These customers are more likely to create social ties with goods and services, valuing those that they believe to be consistent with their cultural standards and belong to their in-group (Song et al., 2018).

Individualistic cultures on the other hand preserve the notion that the person is the master of his own fate and has primary responsibility to himself. Hence, their decisions and choices are not influenced heavily by their community (Luthans & Doh, 2018). Finland is a more individualistic society compared to Pakistan (Saleem, 2017). Individualistic societies often prefer luxury goods and lifestyle, but Finland's low power distance balances out this trait and people are more focused on functionality and quality over a show of wealth (Koski, 2023).

### ***Uncertainty avoidance***

Uncertainty avoidance is the degree to which people are uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity, leading them to seek stability through rules and formal systems (Koski, 2023). To overcome unpredictability, cultures with a high level of uncertainty avoidance place a stronger focus on rule and preset formal structures. Such societies show a general resistance to change and innovation (Mooij & Hofstede, 2010). They view uncertainty as a threat. They have strict rules, and anything different from the norm can feel scary, sometimes leading to prejudice against outsiders. All areas, even as different as law and technology, can be perceived differently depending on the culture. This is different for societies that have reduced uncertainty avoidance show more adaptivity to change; they are more receptive to new ideas, and less reliant on rigid systems (Mooij & Hofstede, 2010). They view uncertainty as a natural part of life. They are more open to change, protest unfair laws, get involved in politics, and are generally more accepting of outsiders (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011). Pakistani society is more cautious and shows a high level of uncertainty avoidance and can be more vary of innovations and technological changes. Finland shows lower uncertainty avoidance.

### ***Power distance***

The hierarchy structure and social inequality is the representative of power distance within a society, including how individual respond to authority (Rinne et al., 2012). This also translates into familial and organizational relationships through hierarchical and dependence relationships (Soares et al., 2007). Routamaa and Brandt (2008) have compared cultural dimensions in Finland and Pakistan and conclude that certain cultural values are held relatively equally across a nation.

The study revealed how values and social relationships emerged and were understood differently across the two contexts. In comparison to Finland, Pakistan has a larger power distance score, indicating a societal acceptance of hierarchical institutions and unequal power distribution. While, Finland has small power distance, emphasizes equality and less hierarchical social interactions (Rinne et al., 2012). This means that humans are not segregated on the basis of wealth or social status, and the overall population is vertically less segmented.

### ***Masculinity vs. femininity***

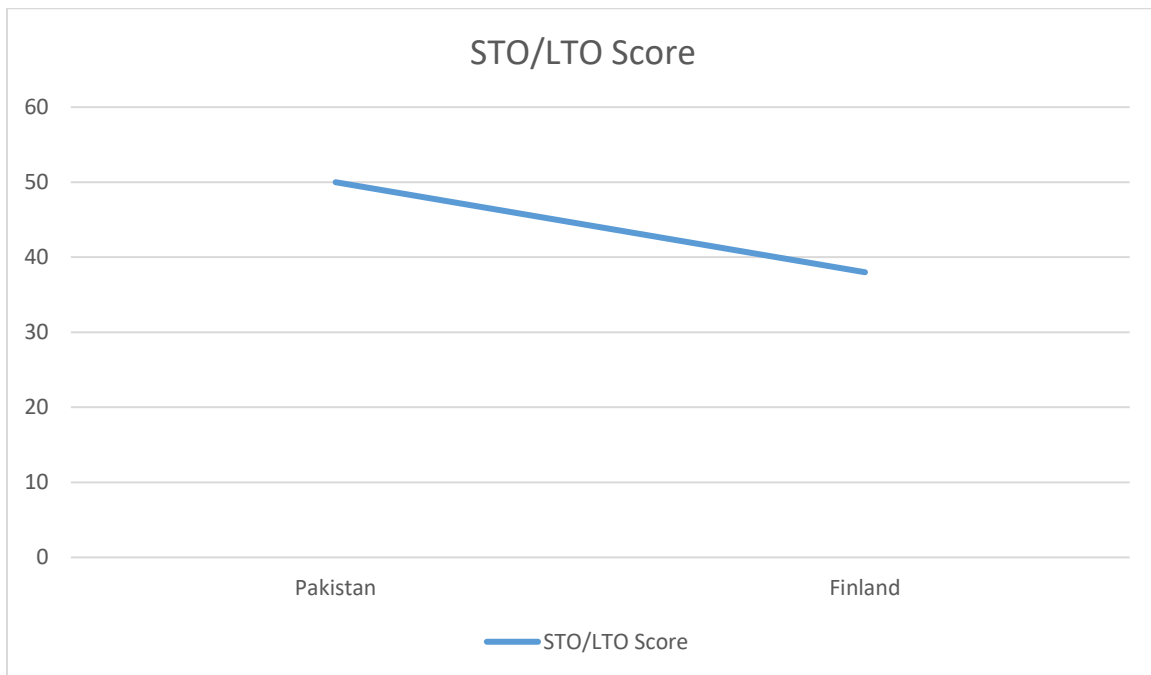
In cultures with strong masculine values, people focus on achievement, competition, and financial success. However, in more feminine culture having a good quality of life, helping others, and generally enjoying a calmer pace of life is prioritized (Soares et al., 2007). Finland scoring only 26 is considered a feminine society. Finnish society places high emphasis on health, quality, and a higher degree of autonomy in their lives (Saleem, 2017). This feminine attribute in Finnish culture is particularly evident in the emphasis on justice and equal rights for all. Hence, there is a strong focus on teamwork, well-being, and social connections (Routamaa & Brandt, 2008). Pakistan, however, has a higher masculinity score, which means its society places more importance on success, competition, and monetary well-being (Soares et al., 2007).

### ***Long term orientation***

Long-term orientation is linked to societal norms and values, influencing how individuals make decisions for both the present and future (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011). This can emerge differently across different nations. Figure 1 depicts a comparison between Pakistan and Finland.

**Figure 1**

*Cross-Cultural Comparison of Short term/long term orientation scores in Pakistan and Finland.*



As shown in the figure above, Pakistan which scores 50 on has a strong long-term orientation culture. Compared to that Finland with a lower score of 38 leans itself more to short orientation (Hofstede Insights, 2022). This shows a larger willingness to adapt to changes and current standards, implying how these cultural perspectives shape consumer behavior and decision-making (Luthans & Doh, 2018). Countries with long-term orientation cultures have a tendency to rely on traditional values and despite resistance to change they show some openness. Due to having a higher concern for future stability, they are more inclined to saving costs and spending less (Steenkamp et al, 1999). In such cases prevention-focused marketing has been observed to appeal to these long-term orientation societies (Koski, 2023). This is in direct contrast to countries with short-term orientation cultures. These are more open to change and adapting to new ideas are innovations (Mooij, 2010).

### ***Indulgence / restraint***

The sixth dimension was added later in the revised Hofstede model published by Hofstede et al. (2010). Some interpretations still tend to exclude the indulgence versus restraint dimension (Minkov & Hofstede, 2011). This dimension focuses on the extent to which people let their desires and greed overtake their decision making and behaviors. In societies that value indulgence, people are encouraged to enjoy life. They spend money and express themselves freely. These cultures are more well off and content with life (Heydari et al., 2021). In more conservative societies, people are taught to control their desires and emotions. Cultures that lean towards indulgence are usually more well off and content with life (Hofstede et al., 2010). People in indulgent cultures feel free to satisfy their desires and enjoy life. As a result, they tend to spend money more easily, especially on fun activities, non-essential items, and entertainment (Koski, 2023). People with a pleasure-seeking mindset when shopping are often linked to indulgent cultures. However, people from restrained culture seek value in products, usefulness and durability at an individual level (Heydari et al., 2021). With a score of 57 in comparison to Pakistan's zero, consumers in Finland are more likely to be indulgent (Hofstede Insights, 2022). These dimensions together set the cultural context for Finland and Pakistan. Table 3 Summarizes comparison of Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

**Table 3.**

#### *Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions in the Case of Pakistan and Finland*

<b>Cultural Dimension</b>	<b>Pakistan</b>	<b>Finland</b>
Individualism-Collectivism	Collectivist	Individualistic
Uncertainty Avoidance	Higher	Lower
Long Term/Short term Orientation	Moderate	Short Term
Power Distance	Higher	Lower
Masculinity	Masculine	Feminine
Indulgence-Restraint	Restrained	Indulgent

*Note.* Adapted from (Hofstede Insights, 2022)

As depicted in Table 3, Pakistan is collectivist, high uncertainty avoidance, moderate long-term orientation, high power distance, masculine, and restrained; Finland is individualistic, low uncertainty avoidance, short-term oriented, low power distance, feminine, and indulgent. These

values can influence societal practices and traditions as Islam (2004) reports that preference for hierarchical authority and collectivist tendencies in Pakistan is reflected their social behaviors. These factors contribute to consumer engagement, understanding and connection with marketing communication, and establishing brand relationship (Rehman, 2021; Shavitt & Barnes, 2020). These values can guide our understanding of how consumers shape perception and behavior (Soares et al., 2007; Steenkamp, 2001).

### ***2.3.2 Cultural dimensions and consumer perception of sustainability marketing***

Cultural values, such as collectivism and uncertainty avoidance, significantly shape how consumers perceive, understand, and act on information. For instance, in collectivist cultures that harbor higher levels of uncertainty and are cautious about their future are heavily reliant on word of mouth and place significance on others' opinions, making community driven marketing that focuses on building social influence can be an effective tool for building trust (Cleveland et al., 2015). It is important for brands to establish trust and decrease uncertainty particularly for customer decision making, since customers choose brands that feel familiar to them (Steenkamp et al., 1999). This notion of ability to trust is closely linked to Hofstede's model. It implies that companies that prioritize their focus on credibility, might reduce customer mistrust and encourage a more open response (Koski, 2023).

Koski (2023) examined marketing communication differences between Japan and Finland taking the case of Marimekko. When it came to Marimekko's sustainable communication across both countries, the content analysis revealed that sustainability-related appeals were significantly more frequent in Marimekko's Finnish marketing materials than in its Japanese ones. Sustainability-related appeals refer to marketing messages highlighting a brand's commitment to environmental protection, ethical practices, and social responsibility, such as use of eco-friendly materials, ethical manufacturing, or initiatives promoting recycling and circular economy (Selby et al., 2009). These appeals illustrated how Marimekko communicates its sustainability practices differently across Finland and Japan, reflecting cultural differences in consumer expectations and marketing strategies. Social media activity in Japan seemed devoid of content on sustainability. While nearly 20% of Instagram posts in Finland consisted of sustainability messages, and their website boasted higher frequency of sustainable content in Finland in comparison to the Japanese website. The

findings showed that cultural dimensions such as Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) and Indulgence versus Restraint (IVR), can lead to these observed differences. Japan as a high uncertainty avoidance country (Hofstede et al., 2010), was found to prefer tangible and immediate concerns rather than abstract and distant issues, whose impact seems a concern of the future rather than here and now. Conversely, Finland, considered to be a more indulgent culture (Hallikainen & Laukkanen, 2018), placed higher emphasis on sustainable consumption and green products, and consumers often use this as justification for frequent purchases from a certain brand.

The dimensions of culture play a relatively important role in determining the manner in which nations communicate and reception of sustainability-related marketing appeals. For example, Matharu et al., (2023) found that cultural dimensions such as uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and indulgence significantly impact consumer purchasing decisions. A high degree of uncertainty avoidance makes the countries choose the options that are less risky and more familiar, and the consumers of the individualistic society buy the product because of their own beliefs and awareness about sustainability (Leo et al., 2005). One of the most used dimensions to justify and explain consumption patterns, including sustainable consumption, is Hofstede's (1980) Individualism vs. Collectivism (Ur Rahman et al., 2021). For many collectivist cultures, as Al Zubaidi (2020) put, collectivism does not hinder sustainable purchase but promotes it. However, in such societies, people are more likely to be prepared to purchase green products for the collective good by sacrificing their pleasure for the benefit of others (Sreen et al., 2018). While in an individualistic society, green purchase is much closely related to an individual's self-betterment and well-being (Ghazali et al., 2021). These sentiments are resonated in the study by Verain et al., (2012) which states that consumers that care about sustainability, are often thinking and acting independently (individualistic), but they also often value helping others and are concerned about the well-being of society (collective).

These differences are reflected across cross cultural studies. A comparative study between France and Japan, a feminine and a highly masculine society, concluded that even though feminine society like France was more inclined to care about quality of life the Japanese society was also warming up to the idea of sustainable consumption (Tehrani et al., 2021). The study concluded that this shift is contrary to the typical characteristics of a masculine society, suggesting that other cultural dynamics may be contributing to this anomaly. It is likely that people in collectivist and high

uncertainty societies may respond well to longer term advantages and collective good for society (Hofstede, 2001). However, in individualistic societies a focus on personal benefits and self-improvement may seem to relate more to people (De Mooij, 2010). In this way different kinds of content may appeal differently across national culture (Steenkamp, 2001). Hence, it is implied that businesses can boost greater trust, engagement and encourage people to make sustainable purchases by tailoring sustainability marketing tactics to these cultural inclinations.

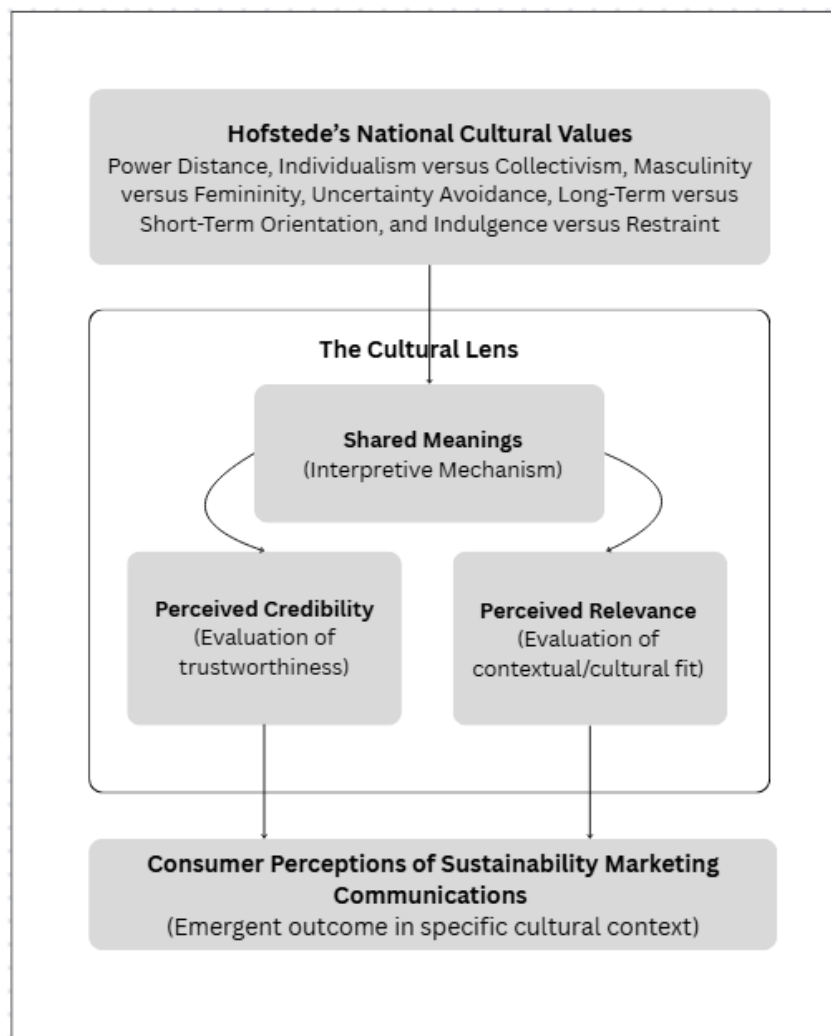
Existing research highlights Hofstede's dimensions' strong explanatory power in interpreting differences in consumer behavior (Faraoni et al., 2021; Rehman, 2021), establishing it as widely applied practical tool in international marketing research especially for the exploration of cross-cultural influences. Hence, Hofstede's framework helps establish the link cultural background and consumer responses (Fedotova et al., 2024), making it an apt tool for understanding the role of cultural values in shaping responses to sustainability marketing communication (Ur Rahman et al., 2021). The existing body of knowledge has an emphasis on cultural dimensions such as individualism vs. collectivism in sustainable consumption and behavior (Faraoni et al., 2021; Rehman, 2021; Ur Rahman et al., 2021; Verain et al., 2012). However, there is limited focus on other dimensions as well as a lack of qualitative comparative data on consumer perceptions across developed and emerging markets, necessitating the current study (Bhatti & Alawad, 2023; De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010; Ur Rahman et al., 2021).

## 2.4 Synthesis: theoretical framework

Whereas the previous subchapters elaborated on sustainability marketing, consumer perceptions and cultural context, this subchapter presents the proposed theoretical framework guiding the study, see Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Cultural Values and Sustainability Perceptions*



As shown in Figure 2 the proposed theoretical framework connects the study's main theoretical elements: national culture, shared meanings, perceived credibility, perceived relevance, and consumer perception of sustainability communication while also outlining how these constructs interact with one another. This guides both data collection and interpretation.

Drawing upon Hofstede's 6 D cultural dimensions as shown in Figure 2, it conceptualizes national cultural values as the foundational element through which consumers actively understand, evaluate, and respond to these messages (Hofstede, 2001). The cultural lens is not perceived in a vacuum as portrayed by Fischer (2009), but it is rather a creation of cultural values of consumers and shared meanings, which together form the perception regarding the trustworthiness and relevance and therefore contributes to the emergent perceptions of sustainability communication of consumers. This makes the framework specifically suitable for cross cultural research since it can explain the operation of cultural values through shared meanings to influence perception.

This framework is useful for this cross-cultural analysis because it does not take the dimensions as fixed traits. It acknowledges that cultural values take meaning in everyday social interactions, what we define as shared meanings. This framework allows us to explore how consumers associate value and meaning of sustainability marketing communication and how these perceptions may diverge between Finland and Pakistan. Comparing these two contexts will shed light on the kind of effective sustainability messaging international brands need to produce to connect with diverse audiences.

The research starts with pre-determined values and develops this by staying open to underlying mechanisms which manifest in the process of in-depth qualitative inquiry. Coherently with abductive reasoning, this conceptualization can be held open to alignment with the data collection gained through the focus group discussions.

### **3 Research methodology**

This chapter details the empirical study conducted for the thesis, focusing on the research design and use of focus group interviews. It begins with an overview of the focus group methodology, including the steps involved. Subsequently, it discusses the recruitment process and profiles of the study participants. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive description of the thematic analysis applied to the data collected from the focus groups.

#### **3.1 Research philosophy and design**

This study adopts a critical realist philosophy in which a mind-independent social world is taken to exist while our access to it remains mediated, partial, and theory laden (Bhaskar, 2008; O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014; Sayer, 2000). For the current study, critical realism is a compelling choice as it focuses on identifying underlying mechanisms that cause events that are being observed, it goes beyond the surface level (Fletcher, 2017). It is especially useful in understanding the processes that inform social patterns and their repeated occurrence (Easton, 2010). Critical realism differentiates between the real, the actual, and the empirical: mechanisms and causal powers belong to the real; events that occur with or without observation belong to the actual; and experiences and accounts constitute the empirical (Bhaskar, 2008). Instead of exhausting itself by recording regularities at the level of experience, this explanation asks what properties and liabilities must be at work for observed patterns to be possible, with the recognition that social life unfolds in open systems where multiple influences intersect and where outcomes are tendencies rather than invariant laws (Sayer, 2000). The stance positions itself between positivism and subjectivism by rejecting a narrow regularity view of causation while refusing to collapse reality into discourse, insisting that structures and practices exert effects even when unrecognized by participants (Everly et al., 2008; O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014).

The critical research philosophy fits the present research in two ways. It offers a coherent way to conceptualize culture not as a fixed trait or a loose label for attitudes, but as an ensemble of emergent properties with causal powers that are activated under conditions (Elder-Vass, 2011). In this thesis, culture is approached through shared meanings and evaluative repertoires that become visible in focus-group talk and that, under specific conditions would shape what is treated as

credible or relevant (Archer, 1995; Mingers & Standing, 2017; Taylor, 2021) in sustainability communication across Finland and Pakistan. It also clarifies the context of qualitative data for explanatory work.

Adopting the critical realist philosophy also makes clear why a purely variable based approach like positivism would be insufficient here. The comparative terrain of sustainability marketing communication is marked by shifting standards, evolving regulatory signals, and heterogeneous audience histories. Isolating stable, portable variables risks flattening the very context that gives claims their force. Critical realism accommodates this complexity by theorizing causal processes as tendencies produced by multiple interacting powers in open systems and by requiring that scope conditions and negative cases be made explicit rather than ignored (Bhaskar, 2008; Sayer, 2000). At the same time, the stance avoids sliding into a descriptive catalogue of meanings. While discursive repertoires are central to how perceptions are expressed, they are analyzed as both concept dependent and causally efficacious once formed, which allows the study to link what participants say to the layered structures that make such talk persuasive in each locale (Mingers & Standing, 2017; Taylor, 2021).

For this critical research, realism aligns with the objective to move beyond surface descriptions of audience reactions towards context sensitive, middle range explanations of how cultural mechanisms shape perceptions of credibility and relevance. Finland and Pakistani culture are not treated as fixed categories but as different configurations of powers and liabilities in which similar messages meet distinct historical and cultural conditions. Using critical realist reasoning with focus-group materials understood as mediated traces, this study aims to generate defensible accounts of mechanism–context–outcome tendencies that remain open to refinement as new evidence and rival interpretations are considered (Moore & Kelly, 2024; O’Mahoney & Vincent, 2014).

The study further adopts comparative qualitative methodology, since the aim was to gain a rich description of participants' subjective perceptions and interpretations of sustainability communications. The research design that best aligned with the problem of exploring cross-cultural interpretations of sustainable marketing and perceptions with sustainability communications from international brands across culturally distinct contexts was a qualitative comparative research approach (Palmberger & Gingrich, 2014). The method of qualitative

comparative research is aptly suited to the task of understanding similarities and differences when exploring a set of complex research questions. Palmberger and Gingrich (2014) highlights that the strength of a qualitative comparative study lies in its ability to unveil meaningful insights from the complexities of limited, well-chosen cases, to understand the differences and similarities across these cases and attributes that shape them.

This limited number of cases for this study aligns with the argument made by Tilly (1984), that increasing the number of cases without a corresponding increase in theoretical depth leads to diminishing returns by hindering the researcher unable to explore theoretical depth. Focus group method is chosen for collection of rich contextual data as well as observation of emergent patterns and commonalities through group discourse. Rather than expanding the sample size, this study explores the complexity and depth of each case to provide a more profound comparative understanding.

The qualitative approach enables a deeper understanding of perceptions and subjective interpretations of international brands' sustainability initiatives. The research chose to explore the social cultural context shaping the perception of a consumer, finding the why behind these perceptions. This qualitative comparison is not only about identifying differences but also understanding both similarities and differences, considering both internal and external factors, and capturing both diversity and commonality within each context (May,1997).

Furthermore, abductive approach is used in this thesis, allowing data to guide the identification of relevant cultural dimensions and insights, rather than relying solely on predefined theoretical frameworks, allowing for a combination inductive and deductive approach (Saunders et al., 2019). Inductive approach looks to establish new theories while deductive is used to falsify or strengthen theoretical claims, both have been criticized for their lack of broad applicability as well as the weak systematic integration of theoretical concepts and empirical insights approach (Saunders et al., 2019). The abductive approach aligns with the notion that qualitative comparative methods are better suited to understanding, rather than measuring, differences (Lewis, 2003).

### **3.2 Data collection**

Focus group interviews were chosen as the data collection method to explore Finnish and Pakistani consumers' perceptions of Unilever's sustainability communications, particularly in digital and

web content. Unilever was chosen as it is a globally recognized name, has visibility in both Pakistan and Finland and has well communicated commitment for sustainability (Hermanses et al., 2024; Unilever, n.d.).

The focus group method was deemed most suitable as it allows for in-depth, versatile insights into different cultural contexts (Slovák et al., 2023). Focus groups offer a useful method for simultaneously gathering an assortment of viewpoints while enabling members to engage and expand on one another's concepts (Lazar et al., 2017), leading to a deeper comprehension of the ways in which culture shapes perceptions of sustainability communications. These viewpoints were gathered through the utilization of focus group discussion guide as shown in Appendix A.

The strong point of using focus groups is that it enables a researcher to gain deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied, allowing for rich contextual insights. These group discussions allow for depth into participants' views on specific topics in a group setting, facilitating interaction among participants that can often reveal ideas and perspectives that may not surface in one-on-one interviews (Smithson, 2008). This being a strength for focus groups can simultaneously be a weakness as well where one participant's voice may overshadow the others (Catterall & Maclaran, 2006). However, for this study it is primarily a strength as culture is constructed and expressed within a community, aligning with Morgan and Krueger's (1997) view, group interaction can reveal data that would remain obscured otherwise.

There are various approaches to undertaking focus group research as discussed by Catterall and Maclaran (2006) such as the discursive approach where what the participant say is taken at face value, or the clinical approach where the researcher assumes that people conceal or are not fully aware of the truth. However, this research uses cultural and linguistic approach to conducting the focus groups. This approach is chosen as it focuses on consumer culture and shared meanings instead of individuals (Catterall & Maclaran, 2006). It considers the assumption that culture is the frame in which individual perceptions and actions are shaped by shared systems of meaning (Valentine & Evans, 1993). By examining the group discussion, the researcher can identify subtle cultural codes/contexts through which a consumer shapes their outlook and experiences that are hard to reveal just by questioning and probing as they are so ingrained in their day-to-day experiences (Catterall & Maclaran, 2006).

In qualitative research it is often hard to determine the appropriate sample size that will yield in-depth data to for thorough comprehension of the phenomenon being studied, the sample size can vary depending on the nature and objective of the study (Hennink et al., 2019). For this study, four focus groups, two from each country were considered, allowing for relatively homogenous groups, which is essential for ensuring that participants share common experiences that are relevant to the research focus (Hughes & DuMont, 1993). The researcher tried to have at least four people in each group but due to last minute technical difficulties at the participants' end, one of the groups only had three participants. However, the overall number of participants from Finland and Pakistan, eight from each, ensured equal representation and allowed for sufficient data to be collected. These eight participants in total, from each country, consisted of three to five participants for each of the focus groups. The manageability of group size facilitated more active participation and allowed for deeper exploration of the diverse perspectives in the topics discussed. A smaller number of people in each group guarantees that the discussion remains relevant and concise, giving each member sufficient time to engage while retaining diversity of opinions. This group size, sometimes referred to as "mini-focus groups" (Krueger, 1994, p. 17), is supported by existing literature on qualitative methods and is deemed sufficient and even advantageous for groups with specific knowledge or experiences (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2015). Focus groups interview are to be used as disciplined traces from which warranted inferences can be drawn when analysis attends to context, countertendencies, and rival accounts (Moore & Kelly, 2024).

The selection of participations for this study was guided by purposive and quota sampling. Purposive sampling was employed to intentionally select individuals who could provide in-depth, context-specific insights on sustainability marketing. This approach is well-regarded in qualitative research for its ability to provide in depth information, rigor, and trustworthiness by closely aligning with sample characteristics to research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015; Etikan et al., 2016; Gentles et al., 2015). In addition, quota sampling was utilized to ensure a balanced representation of gender and varying levels of concern regarding sustainability, facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of consumer perceptions across diverse demographic groups. This style of sampling is recommended in academic literature especially in cases where ensuring diversity of participants is integral to the study (Robinson, 2014). The participants for the focus group were classified as shown in Table 4:

**Table 4.***Selection criteria for participants*

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Description</b>
Age	20–40 years old
Gender	Equal representation of male and female participants from each country
Culturally Distinct Countries	Finland and Pakistan
Sustainability Engagement Level: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaged vs.</li> <li>• Less Engaged</li> </ul>	<p>Awareness and active involvement in sustainability studies/behaviors (e.g., recycling, eco-friendly choices) vs.</p> <p>Limited awareness or inconsistent involvement in sustainability-related behaviours.</p>

As shown in Table 4, the following age group is selected as adults between this age group tend to have more emotional engagement and awareness about sustainability issues (Poortinga et al., 2023; Ágoston et al., 2024; Deloitte, 2025). Furthermore, more age group of 40 and above are generally slightly less avid consumers of digital communication content which is the medium employed for this study. Studies show that the chosen demographic is more likely to use social media and internet which correlates with their knowledge on sustainability issues and development of pro-environmental behavior (Meng et al., 2023). Proportional representation of male and female participants was ensured to capture diverse viewpoints from each country.

Both focus groups from Pakistan and Finland were conducted online in October 2025, through Microsoft Teams as informed in Appendix C. Consent was taken from all participants before the focus group were conducted using online form provided in Appendix B. The participants in the focus groups were selected based on their general awareness of sustainability, with one group from each country consisting of individuals who are more closely concerned with sustainability. This definition as shown in Table 5 was based on factors such as engagement in and knowledge of sustainability-related activities and initiatives.

**Table 5.***Focus group composition*

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Assumed Genders</b>	<b>Engagement Level</b>
SP (SP1, SP2, SP3, SP4)	Pakistan	27-32	2 Female, 2 Male	High Engagement
NP (NP1, NP2, NP3, NP4)	Pakistan	26-30	2 Female, 2 Male	Low Engagement
SF (SF1, SF2, SF3)	Finland	25-33	2 Male, 1 Female	High Engagement
NF (NF1, NF2, NF3, NF4, NF5)	Finland	21-31	3 Female, 2 Male	High Engagement

Including participants with varied degrees of sustainability concern (engaged vs. less engaged) further enabled the researcher to assess both macro and micro level perceptions, as supported by segmentation and cluster analysis methods in contemporary sustainability research (Mařová et al., 2024). A balanced mix of participants with different levels of sustainability interest ensures that researcher is able to include and weigh on a broader spectrum of perceptions and behaviors. This facilitates insights into both groups' perspectives on sustainability communications and practices. These criteria as mentioned in Table 4 were ensured when selecting participants and are reflected for participants from both countries.

The focus group discussions were semi-structured, with core questions targeted at gathering how participants view the credibility and efficacy of sustainability communications. The moderator facilitated conversation on key topics such as brand trust, cultural values, and consumer participation in sustainability initiatives. This structure allowed for both consistency across groups and the flexibility to explore new topics that emerged naturally during the conversations through encouraging participants to engage with each other rather than simply answering questions posed by the moderator (Smithson, 2008). This interaction led to the development of ideas and perspectives grounded in the participants' collective experiences. The discussion led to a total of 134 transcribed pages (SF:28, NF:29, SP: 41, NP:36).

All focus group sessions were video-recorded and transcribed with participants' consent for subsequent analysis. Recording and transcribing the sessions ensured the accuracy of the data and facilitated a thorough thematic analysis of the emerging patterns and themes.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

The collected data was transcribed using AI tool and stored as described in Appendix D. It was subjected to reflexive thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2017) framework for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within the data, allowing patterns and themes to emerge from participants' responses. Thematic analysis was particularly suited for this study due to its flexibility, which allowed for the identification of both explicit and underlying meanings within qualitative data (Terry et al., 2017).

The six-step thematic analysis guide developed by Braun and Clarke (2021) served as the basis for the data analysis procedure. These six stages do not reflect the research methodology, as noted by Braun and Clarke (2021). Instead, the six-step strategy helps make sense of the data, converting a dataset into a conceptually strong narrative.

As the focus of the study has not been previously explored, the abductive research approach was employed to ensure flexibility and to easily oscillate between deductive and inductive reasoning allowing focus on empirical observations, theoretical concepts as well as the research phenomenon under exploration (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Hence, the analysis moved abductively between participants' accounts and conceptual resources to identify patterned responses and then asks which configuration of cultural and institutional mechanisms would need to obtain for those patterns to occur in these settings (O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014; Sayer, 2000).

While Hofstede's dimensions served as an initial framework, the analysis was flexible, allowing the data itself to guide the identification of relevant cultural traits, contexts and social realities that shaped participants' perceptions of sustainability marketing.

#### **Phase 1: Familiarization with data**

The researcher began to familiarize themselves with data by reading the transcript, followed by a line-by-line examination of interview documents during the initial review, following Braun and Clarke (2021)'s six-phase model. As the focus group interviews were conducted on Microsoft teams, the transcripts for the interviews were automatically generated. However, the researcher

went through the recorded interviews again to rewrite and adjust any errors in the automatic transcription. The transcripts were read multiple times to gain in-depth understanding of the collected data.

## **Phase 2: Generating primary codes**

After gaining a thorough understanding of the data the initial coding phase began. This initial phase involved naïve coding, which represented the researcher's first interpretation of the data, rather than the final thematic categories (Nicholls, 2009). The identified codes represent the interpretation of common patterns across datasets as understood by the researcher and this understanding develops at the intersection of the actual data collected, the theoretical assumptions of the study such as the Hofstede Cultural Values and the analytical competence of the researcher (Braun and Clarke 2019). Abductive logic was applied during the analysis as the research went back and forth between participants accounts and relevant concepts to interpret the emerging codes in a credible way (Van Hulst, 2025).

Initially there were 80 primary codes generated for data collected from Pakistani participants and 86 initial codes from Finnish participants. The data for Pakistan and Finland was analyzed separately, and codes were generated for each case analysis. The development of codes was based on both semantic and latent coding; it initiated at the semantic level where focus was on what participant said, it is descriptive in nature but during the subsequent coding sessions, latent coding was conducted to moving beyond the apparent to reveal hidden meanings and underlying assumptions trying to identify, taking a more interpretive route as Braun and Clarke (2020, 2021) repeatedly emphasize that themes are often not on the surface but often concealed within data waiting to be revealed.

Subsequent coding rounds were conducted by the researcher, as guided by Braun and Clarke (2021) to ensure codes that are relevant and applicable to the research question ensuring more depth to the analysis. Following this approach, after a thorough analysis of the initial codes the final codes were reduced to 74 for the data from the Pakistan group and 76 for data from the Finland group. These codes build the analytical foundation of this study, some of which are depicted in Table 6.

**Table 6.***Example codes and quotations*

<b>Code(s)</b>	<b>Example Quotation</b>
Greenwashing Skepticism (Finland)	“But I think it's difficult to say. I think it's good to be critical. But is this greenwashing or is the are they actually being sustainable? Yeah, might be difficult to tell sometimes.” (NF1, p.16); “Some manufacturers buy new plastic bottles just to recycle them.” (NF4, p.15)
Commoditization of Green Claims (Finland)	“That was quite neat thing initially but nowadays it's kind of greenwashing as well. So, it seems that it nowadays it's just extra cost and the company itself might not even own solar plants or windmills that they sell wind power.” (NF2, p.19)
Lack of local context subdues resonance (Pakistan)	“...a local example and that's a good example. That's why I still remember and I could relate to it, but a bad example would be, just putting out random stuff about forests, as a local person I don't care...” (SP4, p.38)
Fear of social judgment / conformity pressure (Pakistan)	“Yes, it was a societal pressure that even if I did get something, you know, just a second hand, if I got something from there, I would never tell that to anybody because I would feel like, oh, they're going to judge me for it.... a huge negative connotation that's attached to it” (SP1, p.24)
Resonance with local sustainability examples/stories (Finland)	“Their goal is to recycle the balls...to make new balls...good idea. Nice to see something like this has come from Finland and is being done here.” (NF4, p.18)

Table 6 shows few examples of codes that generated following data analysis of focus group discussions, along with their respective quotations.

**Phase 3: Searching subthemes**

In the subsequent stages of analysis, commonalities within the data were grouped based on initial perceptions, including identified brand trust, cultural values, and consumer interest in sustainability initiatives (Gibson & Brown, 2009). This grouping of similar codes was utilized to reveal common patterns that were identified as sub themes. This was an iterative process as the nature of coding (and theme development) as suggested by Braun et al. (2019) is flexible, emerging and evolving throughout the analytical process. This nature of emergent codes is attributed to increasing familiarity with data as the research progresses with the analytical process which often leads to more nuanced patterns of understanding.

Employing this approach, researcher evaluated codes from both countries and grouped the ones sharing commonalities into subthemes. A total of 19 subthemes evolved from the data from Pakistan’s group and 14 from Finland’s group. The grouping of codes into subthemes is depicted in Table 7 below.

**Table 7.**

*Example codes and generation of subtheme*

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Example Quotation</b>
Lack of sincere communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived hypocrisy</li> <li>• Companies do it for image</li> <li>• Action, communication mismatch</li> <li>• Compliance not care</li> <li>• Term used to gain publicity</li> </ul>	<p>“Coca-Cola in Pakistan claimed to have returned 800 million liters of fresh water to the local communities. But when there was an independent study done, they figured out that they took a lot more of the groundwater than they returned.” (SP3, p.20); “For example, if a company plants a few trees but continues to pollute rivers. People kind of notice this sort of stuff, and it's a clear contradiction.” (SP3, p.5)</p>

Table 7 shows how a set of assigned codes that were grouped into clusters forming a subtheme based on commonalities, the example quotations represent the code ‘Action, communication mismatch’. The codes as shown below were grouped together to develop the subtheme ‘Lack of sincere communication’. These subthemes were further stratified by similarity into overarching themes.

#### Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Once the codes have been grouped into relevant subthemes and themes, the researcher reviewed these identified themes to ensure that they are valid and coherent. To ensure that each theme was properly developed and conceptually sound the researcher traced each of them back to the code and the quotation based on which it was generated. Table 8 shows grouping of subthemes into a final main theme.

**Table 8.**

*Example of theme development and evaluation*

Subthemes	Theme	Example Quotation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distrust in sustainability communication</li> <li>• Lack of sincere communication</li> <li>• Demand for proof and verification</li> <li>• Trust in higher authority/ Institutional Power</li> <li>• Authenticity bias (foreign &gt; local)</li> </ul>	Mechanisms shaping trust and credibility	<p>“So, the companies and the government should team up, they should bring enough resources for us to like follow sustainability and instead of just like advertisements and everything, they should like do it in real life as well.” (NP4, p.30)</p> <p>“I think to create more impact within our community, it should be normalized in the system and how the system is created. System is created by the government. It starts with the reinforcement... the laws and regulation and policies are actually created by them and implemented and forced on people by them.” (NP3, p.31)</p>

The quotations shown in the Table 8 above corresponds to the subtheme ‘Trust in higher authority/ Institutional Power’. The subtheme was reviewed by going back to the quotation to understand if it matched the underlying context behind what the participant said, in accordance with the iterative nature of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

At this point some of the codes and subthemes were even renamed and some new emerged to better relate to the overarching themes and overall focus of research (Byrne, 2022). This was the first level of review and at the second level researcher related the emerged subthemes and themes for the entire data set and evaluated their ability to answer the research questions developed by the researcher. In doing so, the researcher often asked themselves the following questions throughout the reviewing process as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012). They are:

- “Is this a theme (it could be just a code)?”
- “If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme (does it tell me something useful about the data set and my research question)?”
- “What are the boundaries of this theme (what does it include and exclude)?”
- “Are there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme (is the theme thin or thick)?”
- “Are the data too diverse and wide ranging (does the theme lack coherence)?” (p.65)

Taking this helped build confidence in the proposed themes and ensured analytical rigor.

#### **Phase 5: Defining and naming themes**

At this stage of the process the subthemes and themes were reviewed. Firstly, the researcher tried to ensure that the themes were providing an accurate representation of the overall dataset from both countries and secondly, that the subthemes and themes that were developed were able to answer the research questions proposed by the study. Based on the complete dataset these four themes were developed:

- Mechanisms shaping trust and credibility
- Sustainability communication that resonates
- Contextual realities shaping sustainability engagement
- Sustainability as a culturally understood construct

The defining part comes after this, where the researcher thoroughly reviews the data items again and decides which extracts will be used to define each theme, and which ones will be utilized and shared in writing the findings section to provide a strong analysis (Byrne, 2022). The selection of quotes should reflect their alignment with the research questions (Eldh et al., 2020), Multiple

extracts were used to ensure diverse perspectives across the datasets were informing themes and that they all share core central ideas.

### **Phase 6: Reporting**

Once the analytical process has been finalized the researcher now starts reporting what they have found but unlike quantitative approach where once data is collected, analyzed and then reported, even at this stage of reporting the findings the process will remain recursive as the researcher goes back and forth between themes, datasets and interpretation and as the writing progresses there might be changes in codes or themes (Byrne, 2022). The most relevant quotations from data set were used to explain the themes to ensure that narrative building is rooted data collected from participants. The findings section constructs a narrative that addresses the research questions directly and illustrates how the themes that have been developed contribute to answering them. The primary research question and its sub-research questions served as a guide for this writing process. The next chapter presents these findings.

## 4 Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the focus group study drawing on participants' accounts from both Finland and Pakistan. The findings were organized into four main themes and for each theme a comparative narrative from both focus groups was presented to help elucidate how consumers across each cultural group, shape understanding of credibility and relevance, and their perceptions of sustainability marketing communication. The findings show that these meanings are different across both countries, shaped by cultural values, lived experiences and socioeconomic realities. The four themes collectively provide understanding of how participants in Finland and Pakistan perceive sustainability communication from international brands in terms of meaningfulness, resonance and what promotes skepticism and mistrust. Before examining each theme in detail, Table 9 offers a concise overview of the themes and their interpretive focus, serving as a visual guide to the analytical narrative developed in this chapter.

**Table 9.**

*Overview of main themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Interpretive Focus</b>
Mechanisms shaping trust and credibility	How people across Finland and Pakistan view and interpret trustworthiness in sustainability communication
Sustainability communication that resonates	What issues, features or approach to sustainability solutions seem most meaningful and relevant
Contextual realities shaping sustainability engagement	How socioeconomic, environmental and infrastructural realities shape sustainable behavior and define which issues take precedence
Sustainability as a culturally understood construct	How cultural norms, values and meanings shape the perception and understanding of sustainability/sustainability behavior

## 4.1 Mechanism shaping trust and credibility

This section presents first identified main theme, on how participants across Finland and Pakistan perceive sustainability claims as credible or greenwashing and false claims. It highlights the factors that shape their judgments of authenticity and trustworthiness.

### 4.1.1 *Finnish study participants' perceptions on credibility*

Among participants from Finland there was a unified feeling of skepticism towards sustainability communication. Multiple factors attributed to this shared perception, one such factor was that these claims were often seen as superficial and lacking authenticity. Participants also noted that these days, labels such as “Eco-friendly” and “Recycled” are just pasted on products just to fit in with the sustainability trend that is prevalent in Europe given the regulatory policies (NF4, SF3). However, these labels are not sufficient to add credibility as they do not provide enough context and confidence for the consumer, resulting in doubt regarding what the label actually means (SF3). This showed that just claiming something is not enough, there is evident need for depth and context building in the information that is being provided.

This skepticism extended beyond products labels. Sustainability claims were also at times found to be contradictory from the actual actions the company undertakes, undermining trust of participants in such claims. Such experiences were interpreted not just as misleading, but as deliberate deception that overtime corrodes confidence in sustainability narratives. This mismatch was described through examples by participants. For instance, one of the study participants mentioned that, “Some manufacturers even buy new plastic bottles and then recycle them to then get to write that they are recycled bottles to sell it, well that's greenwashing.” (NF4, p.15)

This example shows how participants can see sustainability communications as manipulative to coerce the audience into believing something that they are not actually doing. Another similar opinion was voiced by another participant who shared an example from Microsoft, where the company made sustainability efforts but simultaneously caused harm to the environment, which portrayed deception and inconsistency to the participant:

I think it's like deforestation that was included there because like the data centers are built in the in the forest and they are taking the forest out there ...for example this big

multinational company like Microsoft, they are donating money to protect Finnish forest, but at the same time they are taking away forests. (SF2, p.5)

Participants highlight that companies were quick to jump on the sustainability trend to manipulate consumer perception without any authentic efforts and this behavior is noticed by consumers in the oversaturation of sustainability claims made by companies these days as shown by the quote below.

In Finland, it has been so that companies know consumers are more knowledgeable about these issues and care more about sustainability [...] They all want to be sustainable, but they may not pay attention to what actually is sustainable. They just say, yeah, we're sustainable because we do this and that we cut electricity in our office. Yet the product itself would not be sustainable. (SF3, p.13)

Participants noted that over access to information made it even harder to differentiate between what was authentic and what was just a gimmick as one participant mentioned, "Sustainability is everywhere currently, even though it wouldn't be truthful, it's really hard to stand out with your sustainability claims as genuine." (SF1, p.15). However, the participants from sustainability focused group professed that after studying in the field of sustainability had honed their analytical skills to identify greenwashing attempts and falsification, as one participant illustrated, "We are evolved sustainability-oriented people. We maybe do know how to question these, and we pay more attention to the detail and actually the content than just the campaign." (SF1, p.18).

The responses further highlighted certain elements that elevated this mistrust and at the same time showed how credibility and trust in sustainability communication can be encouraged among consumers. Over reliance on internal experts to back their claims was frowned upon along with companies doing it for profits at the expense of consumers and opting for selective discourse where they fail to provide the full picture of their sustainability journey, only exposing the good parts and not full transparency about their progress and setbacks (NF1).

Participants also communicated mistrust when the message portrayed a company-controlled narrative especially in cases where the verification and data provided was in house rather than supported by third party verification. As company-controlled narrative induced feelings of self-serving claims, for the benefit of company, this is shown by the following quotation, "Usually if a large company says that our own scientists...have developed this, I feel a bit more distrust because

it's not an independent person who has verified it. So, they are getting paid on saying something.” (SF1, p.25)

Another participant added to this by saying how once genuine change now just came of a superficial and an added cost at the consumers' end because of the commercialization of sustainability, and communication without accountability, they shared an example of companies selling green energy at high prices without actually owning solar plants or windmills (NF2).

Overall, all participants were cautious when exposed to sustainability claims due to higher awareness, long-term exposure to sustainability claims and expectation for transparency. Their accounts revealed that trust is undermined when companies base their communications on superficial labels, contradictory practices, personal gains and practice selective disclosure. Furthermore, presence of abundant sustainability claims has made it difficult for those who might lack awareness to gauge what is genuine and what is not.

#### ***4.1.2 Pakistani study participants' perceptions on credibility***

Data analysis highlights that most of the participants from Pakistan also viewed sustainability communication as often lacking in credibility. This mistrust stemmed mainly from the gap between what companies say and what they deliver. Many participants felt that communication from multinational companies often did not match with their actual actions and ground realities, it was seen as a way for them to manipulate their customers into believing that they are authentic and are invested in solving sustainability issues faced by target consumers community, this was reflected through example of environmental initiatives such as planting trees contradicted by water pollution from the same company (SP3). Another participant from the neutral group resonated, adding that this contradictory behavior is pretty evident, especially when they looked in their surroundings and looked at the harm the self-proclaiming eco-friendly companies were causing, it made it hard to place trust in their communication (NP1). The following quotation resonates with this sentiment:

Coca-Cola in Pakistan claimed to have returned 800 million liters of fresh water to the local communities. But when there was an independent study done, they figured out that they took a lot more of the groundwater than they returned. (SP3, p.20)

These experiences prompted the perspective that companies often have hidden truths, and this lack of clear communication appeared in subtle forms as well such as scientific greenwashing, where

companies relied on extensive use of technical jargon to appear more authentic but at the same time failing to ensure accuracy as one participant reported:

If a quick Google search can really show you that your surfactant formula is not the best... then what's the point of claiming these studies and showing it on your website? If you're making a claim, you need to be sure it's trustworthy and verifiable. Otherwise, it's just pure manipulation. So in my opinion, if you did that sort of study and you have surface level data, show it then, show it, link it so that everybody can see and decide for themselves rather than you telling like, oh, I read it the best research on the planet and this is our results. So, for me, if you're claiming something scientific, you need to show your study. (SP3, p.36)

Another deeper-rooted perspective that emerged was postcolonial mistrust of sustainability communication from the Global North, as a participant highlighted that communication from such companies often carried a paternalistic tone, where corporations presented themselves as helping communities in the Global South through symbolic gestures, such as donating goods.

Companies, for instance, in the North are they have campaigns that are sustainable or social sustainability campaigns where they talk about, ok, you do this and then we send a pair of shoes to India, for instance, because people in the North have a savior complex and they want to do something for the global South. (SP1, p.39)

While such actions may be marketed as benevolent, the participant suggested they are rooted in a "savior complex". From this perspective, such campaigns are viewed as superficial by the locals and are seen more as tools to appeal to Northern consumers who want to feel they are contributing to global causes. At the same time there was one participant from neutral group, who put forward a differing trust pattern where communication from multinational companies was perceived as more professional and trustworthy than the claims of domestic firms (NP3). According to the participant, this perception did not emerge from evidence of better sustainability performance, but from a socially shared tendency to trust foreign sources more readily. This depicts a trust hierarchy, where foreign sources are considered to be more credible. This varying perspective highlights a that trust is not an entirely monolithic concept among Pakistani participants, even if rarely individual perceptions can diverge.

It is also worth noting however that among Pakistani participants those from neutral group were slightly less skeptical and focused more on improving authenticity of claims rather than highlighting negatives. Their advice focused on communication that is rooted in evidence, and it was perceived to be even better if that evidence is visible and verifiable, as one participant pointed out that without people seeing any physical difference it is hard for people to believe in communication, hence they proposed that companies should focus on actual positive changes they have contributed, highlighting them in their communication (NP1), this was further agreed upon by another participant, “I think like real world implementations will satisfy us more as compared to words.” (NP4, p.29).

Another recommendation from neutral group was to focus on collaboration with governmental bodies as they place trust in institutional actions and higher authority to have any actual impact rather than relying on independent corporate claims. They felt communication to be hollow if not paired with actual systematic steps, which to them is only possible if it comes from the government (NP4, NP3), as one participant shared:

I think to create more impact within our community, it should be normalized in the system and how the system is created. System is created by the government. It starts with the reinforcement... the laws and regulation and policies are actually created by them and implemented and forced on people by them. (NP3, p.31)

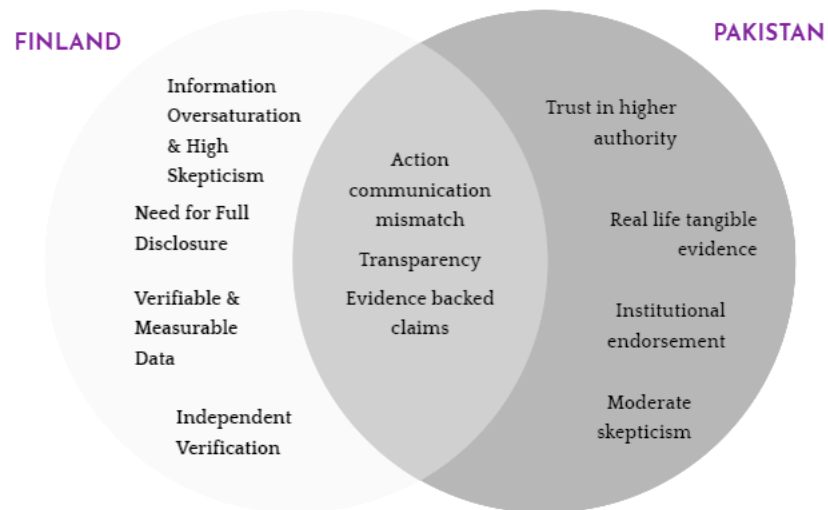
The accounts of Pakistani participants primarily highlight mistrust shaped by contradictions between corporate claims and observable realities. Furthermore, differing viewpoints and approaches of perceiving trustworthiness and credibility can be noticed among the neutral and sustainability focused group.

#### ***4.1.3 Similarities and differences (Finland vs. Pakistan)***

The need for trustworthy sustainability communication was highlighted by study participants from both countries. There were certain points of convergence in how people judge the credibility of sustainability communication and certain factors that differ between each country. These differences and commonalities are highlighted in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Shared patterns and differences in perceptions of trust and credibility*



As shown, the main observed similarity was the need for corporate claims to be reflected in a company's actual actions and impacts (NP1, SP3, NF4, SF2). When there was apparent mismatch in the action and communication from a company, participants perceived this as clear evidence of greenwashing, which quickly eroded trust. Independent verification was also considered essential, since claims backed only by internal experts or vague were not perceived as authentic. Another preference shared by both countries participants was need for higher transparency and verifiable claims, however it was much strongly emphasized by participants from Finland (NF5, NF2). Participants from Finland viewed transparency through measurable, data drive evidence. Hence, participants from both countries highlighted the need for verifiable claims (SF1, SP3).

Beyond these commonalities, perceptions of trust and credibility differed. In Finland, skepticism was shaped by the oversaturation of sustainability messaging, extensive exposure to greenwashing discourse, and the perception that companies use sustainability as a trend-driven marketing tool. Trust was evaluated on basis of full disclosure when it came to struggles and wins as well as through analytical scrutiny (NF1, NF5, SF3 and SF1). For Pakistan, trust stemmed from visible and tangible impact seen within their local communities, their surroundings (NP1, NP4). Another point of difference was the role of governmental/political institutions. Finnish participants prioritized independent verification over institutional endorsement, whereas Pakistani participants

associated credibility with regulation, systemic implementation, and collaboration with state authorities.

## **4.2 Sustainability communication that resonates**

The second main theme addresses the differences and similarities in relevance as well. Where relevance is taken as how meaningful and resonant sustainability communication is to an individual. This section sheds light on this part of the question and elaborates on what participants found meaningful across both countries.

### ***4.2.1 Finnish study participants' perceptions on relevance***

According to data analysis, the meaningfulness of sustainability communication was seen to partially stem from credibility and was associated with how transparent and easily verifiable that communication was. One of the main focus which all participants agreed upon was the optimization of the sustainability marketing communication being shared, it should not be overwhelming with a lot of information using technical jargon (SF1), or about them trying to target multiple sustainability issues but be focused on the kind of change the company is aiming to make, hence it was deemed important that companies try to narrow down the scope of their initiatives focusing more on something they can actually do instead of trying to do it all. Their approach needs to be realistic, as one participant said you cannot target the broader issue you need to first address the smaller problems that feed into that bigger issue (SF3). Otherwise, it can feel like a plethora of information that fails to connect at all with the consumer.

Hence, it was recommended by the participants that instead of taking this shallow, overarching approach companies should “pick their battles” i.e. choose the specific causes that they want to work towards instead of trying to do everything and they should internalize that aim into their core strategy trying to achieve it effectively (SF3).

At the same time, balancing information did not mean that they should not present a thorough and clear picture. As many participants also reported the need for companies to be fully transparent and share more details about what they are doing towards their said goals (NF5), where more measurable initiatives and impacts were preferred because of the ease of verification (NF2), as

large global impacts were deemed to unverifiable such that there was no way the company or the consumer could fully know the actual ground reality.

Participants shared communication examples that resonated with them, while sharing these examples they showed connect and a sense of pride knowing that these initiatives stemmed from Finland. This showed that communication was more than just relaying information but s to the identity and values of the consumer.

For example, a licorice company called Lakritsitehdas made a campaign. It wasn't so much about environmental sustainability, but social: they created a Guinness World Record candy bag and sold it. With that revenue, they bought an apartment in Kouvola and launched a big campaign for young people who had kind of fallen off from the world... The person who won had different kinds of disabilities and difficulties adapting to the world, and he got an apartment in Kouvola and a workplace there. He's still working there after two to three years. So, I think that was one campaign about social sustainability where I thought, wow, that's actually really beautiful, you have this huge plan to make it possible. (SF3, p.16)

For this study participant, as the data quotation above also shows, it was more about at the actual long-term impact that the company had been able to create while for another the local example held more weight because it represented innovative solution stemming from a Finnish brand and it made him associate feelings of national pride (SF3).

Lastly, the participants reported that connectivity and meaningfulness go beyond just the shared information and impact is also equally about the tone and style of communication that can leave a lasting impression. Participants felt that what really makes sustainability communication stick is not really only about receiving factual information but the emotions behind them. A message more centered on emotional appeal was more likely to leave its imprint in the minds of consumers (SF1, SF3). Hence, emotional storytelling was identified as a tool to promote strong attachment and shape everyday choices. They also mentioned how visuals like photos or videos can cut through complexity and make the story instantly clear (NF4). In that way, visual storytelling came across as a powerful way to draw people in and keep them engaged.

#### *4.2.2 Pakistani study participants' perceptions on relevance*

For the Pakistani participants, according to the data analysis, meaningfulness was experienced through emotions and connect with their social surroundings and everyday realities. Abstract communication or overt use of scientific terms was seen as less appealing as consumers in Pakistan put emotional connection at the forefront especially when it emphasized through their cultural and religious values (NP2, NP4). Family-centered campaigns that highlighted relational bonds also seemed to add a positive association and long-term remembrance, based on the feelings that they evoked as well promoting a sense of belonging (NP1, SP1). One of the study participants aptly illustrated this observation in the following way:

Over the years, I've seen adverts that really play on emotions. For example, during Ramadan Pepsi or Coke ran campaigns where they used recycled plastic bottles to create lights in the streets. These kinds of adverts evoke emotions and make people feel more attached to the brand—like, oh look, they're reusing plastic bottles, even though we know what these brands are doing internationally. (SP1, p.14)

This participant from sustainability focused group remembered this campaign that they saw many years back but how it stayed with them as it evoked emotional appeal within her, even though now she has increased skepticism that has only come with more awareness on sustainability issues and practices around the globe.

Along with emotional and cultural framing, another important element was emphasis on long-term impacts and to elaborate more on the kind of difference that they were actually bringing about rather than just claiming that they are doing something. This was even more crucial as countries in Global South are often the epicenters of raw material extraction or cheap labor it becomes more critical that actual help and change is brought about for the local people. The participants wanted these claims to be corroborated with real life stories and examples that were centered on local people and how they were being uplifted (NP4), local representation promoted valuable connection because it led them back to their community and showed them change in ways it directly mattered to them. Hence, the participants preferred more context in sustainability marketing communication where company can show exactly what their initiative changed in someone's life as illustrated by a participant in the following way:

I don't consider it to be giving back to society. It feels more like, oh yeah, we just created more stuff so that locals like us more and stay friendly toward us, while their resources are being exploited. To me, that's more of a hidden message than anything else. If they really wanted to do something, I would say add more context—tell us the story if there is one, like why supporting these women was important and what kind of change did it bring about. (SP3, p.32)

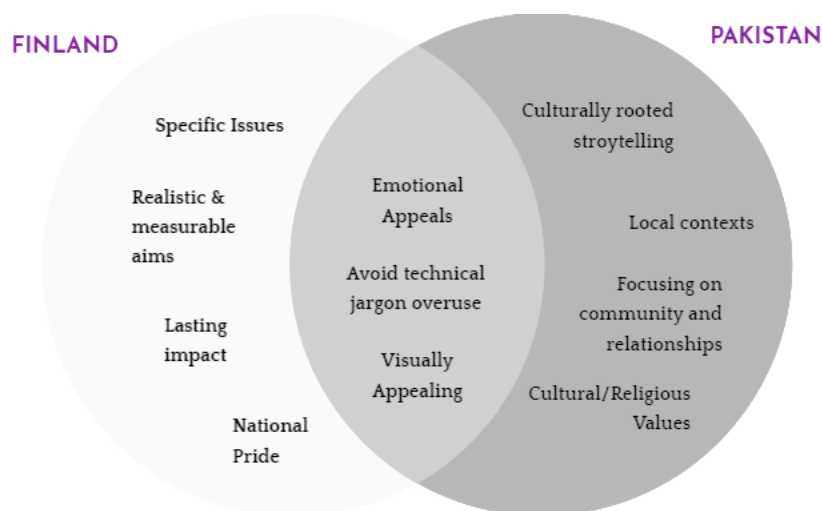
Furthermore, there was appreciation for short form visual content that is not saturated with text, which makes it easier to garner consumers attention (NP3, NP1). With shorter attention spans visually engaging content is preferred. On the other hand, in order to gain more attention and significance within the community, utilization of influential figures was given prominence as people were more likely to give weight to a message if it was backed by somebody who people listen to and viewed as someone holding social or religious authority (NP1, NP2).

#### 4.2.3 Comparing Finland and Pakistan

The findings showed that associated meaningfulness and relevance was seen through different attributes across both nations as shown in Figure 4 below.

**Figure 4**

*Difference and commonalities in meaningfulness*



When it comes to shared themes for both countries there is apparent appeal for emotional communication as it makes it easier to internalize and connect to it (NP1, SP1, SF1, SF3). Visually appealing content emerged as another commonality as it is something that helps consumers engage more easily with the message provided (NF4, NP3). Finnish participants did not prefer overarching claims but communication of realistic goals, failures and successes. The participants from Pakistan felt that they cared more about stories that were centered around the local people and examples of how they were improving their lived realities. According to data analysis, Finnish participants also showed higher connect with local example, but it was more about national pride and lasting impact. Lastly, Pakistan participants also added weightage to amplifying connectivity through collaboration with influential figures or religious leaders, a factor completely absent from Finnish accounts.

### **4.3 Contextual realities shaping sustainability engagement**

The third identified theme showed that lived realities and social structures varied across both countries and contributed to shaping engagement with sustainability. This section discusses these factors with respect to both countries, to understand their role and how they shape the understanding of sustainability in both contexts as expressed through participant accounts, which help to explain the observed similarities and differences discussed in the previous two themes.

#### ***4.3.1 Finnish participants' contextual realities shaping sustainability***

In Finland, sustainability was strongly shaped by well-developed infrastructure and societal norms that make sustainable practices accessible and normalized. Many participants reported that recycling had become extremely normalized in their surroundings as it was supported by strong infrastructure making it easier to recycle (NF5, NF4, SF2). This accessibility did not end at recycling but also includes access to local and organic food, nature and basic resources which it easier to practice clean living (SF3). Some of the participants also perceived Finland as a largely equal country with very little segregation between the rich and poor and children grow up with access to diverse social connections, high education and awareness among the population (SF3). These conditions contributed to a shared sense of progress and responsibility, while acknowledging that further work remains to be done (SF2). As reported by one of the Finnish study participants, recycling opportunities are not only provided in Finland, but they are, quoting,

“A big part of home life and how I increase my part of the sustainability in the environmental part.” (NF5, p.6).

Due to more awareness and supporting structure participants found it easier to incorporate sustainable practices in their day-to-day life. Actions such as reducing petrol use, preferring trains over flights, and considering fuel consumption were seen as meaningful ways to live more sustainably. An overall individual effort for sustainable consumerism was quite evident in the participants where they were willing to research and find detailed information before making purchase decisions (SF1, NF5, SF3, SF2). Also, participants had a shared positive attitude toward second-hand consumption which was also evident through the use of platforms like Vinted and are viewed as a valuable practice.

For me it's like personally it's individual acts that I do, like for example recycling as much as I can, buying occasionally clothes from thrift shops, and using or preferring public transport. Also, in the future I want to work in a sustainability role that enhances the sustainability of companies. (SF2, p.1)

However, having access to abundant information also presents a unique problem as voiced by one participant, that too much information can make it hard to determine the best possible approach to sustainable consumerism at times, it compromises the analytical clarity of a consumer hindering the resonance of sustainability marketing communication (SF1). As even with sustainable systems in place there is a chance of over-exploiting or misusing the system, sometimes knowingly or unknowingly, as depicted in the following quotation:

The use of Vinted, the app or use clothes that that has actually been increasing the postage or the packets sent through Finnish post offices. And adding to that maybe also related to trying on 7 or buying 7 jackets and then returning six of them. I've seen now recently some discussion that some people use Vinted also in that way, so they order the same thing from different sellers and then whichever packets gets to them first, they only keep that one and then because if they don't go get the packets from the post office, they are automatically sent back to the seller and that also creates double emissions, so to say from the transportation. (SF1, p.6)

Data analysis also shows that participants had greater emphasis on issues that were deemed important through the communication seen in media and within their community, they depicted

low interest in distant global issues such as child labor, while topics such as circular economy, racism, gender inequality, freedom of speech, lack of inclusivity in workplace, Finnish welfare and economic issues were topics that they were highly engaged with (NF5, SF1, SF2, SF3, NF3).

#### ***4.3.2 Pakistani participants' contextual realities shaping sustainability***

In Pakistan, sustainability engagement was described as limited and shaped by pressing socioeconomic and environmental realities. Everyday sustainability practices also emerged among participants of Pakistan in small acts such as shopping second hand, or buying recyclable products although it was less widely normalized, as sustainability is not a topic that is given much attention it as one participant said:

We are just in those phases where, in Pakistan at least, it is either the very educated class that is doing it or the people with limited resources who want to manage their resources well. Other than that, people don't really give much attention to it. (NP1, p.2)

According to data analysis, there were multiple factors that were constraining the normalization of such behaviors. A major recognized element was socio-economic stratification and the lack of basic necessities being met that are essential to human survival (SP3, NP2). Pakistan has a significant divide between social classes, between the rich and the poor and their lived realities (NP3, SP4). In this way, sustainability becomes a luxury. Those who are struggling to survive choose to focus on the needs considered more immediate to them and may be more concerned with socio-economic sustainability issues compared to climate change, or deforestation as for them it feels like a distant concern (NP1).

This divide also exacerbated the lack of uniform education and awareness among the population, where a large percentage lacked awareness about sustainable issues and solutions. Where one participant mentioned that sustainability awareness is for the elite (SP3). This sentiment was shared by one other participant, who mentioned majority of people in Pakistan deal with many underlying concerns that sustainability issues are naturally deemed less urgent in the eyes of the public, leading to scarcity in awareness and discourse (NP3). These pressing issues also included extreme weather phenomenon experienced in Pakistan such as floods, heat waves and smog, which further hinder accessibility for people to get education (SP4). Even though climate change in Pakistan seemed to be extremely prevalent it did not seem to contribute to awareness of

sustainability issues at a larger scale. Based on this lack of awareness and socio-economic constraints sustainability engagement was stemmed in economic necessity. Participants described reusing resources and renting items not as environmental choices but as cost-saving strategies:

But still, you know, if you say that something is pre-loved, then you are subconsciously thinking, okay, I'm saving the environment with this as well. And this is good for me because I don't need to buy a new product. (SP4, p.24)

A mattress brand which had this campaign where if you have a used mattress, you could take that back and then get a new one at a discounted price. So, I think that is also circular in a way because you're, you know, giving back something that you've used, getting a new one, but that's not how they marketed it. But it really worked, at least in my circle. I've heard about it. It was not marketed as sustainability. The concept was the same, but then they marketed it more on the price aspect. (SP1, p.26)

Hence, sustainability engagement emerged quite differently often from a more pragmatic foundation than that in Finland. Pakistani consumers were more likely to engage with sustainability communication more if it was presented through an angle of utility and reducing cost (SP1, SP4). There was overall less sustainability engagement in Pakistan as supported by participant accounts, because of various constraints such as economic hardship, lack of access to education and minimal public discourse.

#### ***4.3.3 Comparison Finland vs. Pakistan***

Sustainability engagement in Finland and Pakistan reflects two very different lived realities. In Finland, strong infrastructure, social equality, and widespread awareness make sustainable practices easy to adopt and integrate into daily routines. People recycle, buy second-hand, use public transport, and actively seek information because the systems around them encourage and support these choices. This is contrary to Pakistan, where economic hardships, social class segregation, and the struggle for basic survival make it hard to adapt such practices and discourage sustainability discourse, especially among the less privileged. Practices such as reusing or renting items arise mainly from financial necessity rather than environmental concern. These differences help us understand how sustainability communication can connect differently across both countries, where in one it can revolve around affordability rather than environmental

responsibility, and in the other it can be reinforced through individual actions and ways of living, such as recycling, second-hand shopping, or circular economy initiatives.

#### **4.4 Sustainability as a culturally understood construct**

The fourth identified main theme, moved away from the societal structures and lived realities to culturally rooted norms (traditions), behaviors and values that shape how consumers understand and attach meaning to sustainability, resulting in how they shape perceptions of sustainability communication. Sustainability is taken as more than just a universal construct but one deeply embedded in cultural contexts, influencing both perception and practice, across Finland and Pakistan.

##### ***4.4.1 Finnish participants' cultural understanding of sustainability***

Finnish participants understood sustainability as protecting the environment and ensuring justice and wellbeing of the people. As one participant explained, “Sustainability for me means environmental things, but in addition to this, it also means societal things [...] how we treat people. It also means decisions for education or healthcare or any aspects that impact society.” (NF1, p.2)

The raw data quotation above depicts a common understanding of sustainability as a broad, interconnected concept that links ecological health with social justice. Participants described environmental issues a prominent part of Finnish public life. Many noted that discourse about nature protection and climate change appears regularly in news coverage and everyday media, creating a sense that sustainability is something the whole society pays attention to (NF2, NF4, NF5). Participants talked about topics like climate and nature preservation, that are heavily covered in media and their social circles, showing that environmental responsibility is embedded in the shared beliefs of their community.

However, even though there was shared care for their environment, there were differences among participants in how much responsibility and connection they associated with issues such as climate change showing their individualistic culture and way of thinking and reaching synthesis about same issues.

There are so many fires around the world. Every single year there's huge parts of countries and houses and animals are burnt just because it's easier for trees to catch fire because the planet is getting hotter and hotter all the time. It is alarming for me. (NF5, p. 10)

I'm not sure. Maybe it's something that I need to think more about. I don't think it impacted that much how cold or warm it has been. The World and the globe are changing all the time, but I don't think it's something that we have done. There were winters without snow when I was also little... that's not something new. (NF3, p.9)

Participants from Finland felt much interested and involved when they associated the issue or solution at a personal level. One participant prioritized biodiversity over climate change as they felt more agency over making any actual change towards it (NF2). Although climate change was recognized as an important topic, a few participants described it as distant, abstract, or difficult to connect to their own behavior (NF3, NF4). As illustrated by the following quote:

They get it to sound like we in Finland need to make the change, like our decisions will somehow affect whether the planet saves itself or not, then we have to change our whole lives. To me that is wrong Finland is not the problem we do really well here. (NF4, p.6)

Participants further associated importance with sustainable causes that were largely discussed in their close friends and family, depicting influence of their immediate social circle, as shared by one participant, "I'm wearing a pride lanyard at the moment, and in my circle, my friends and family—it's really important for us to take part in making the world more socially responsible." (SF1, p.3).

The participant also shared how they had reduced buying fast fashion as it was practiced among her friend group. This showed how social expectations and peer dynamics contributed to the direction of sustainability awareness and action.

To summarize, data analysis demonstrates that Finnish sustainability awareness is deeply influenced by shared beliefs and norms that keep nature preservation at the center, which is facilitate by independent thinking and public discourse. There was a lack of conformity in the responses from Finland highlighting their individualistic culture and the diverse ways people interpret their role in sustainability.

#### 4.4.2 *Pakistani participants' cultural understanding of sustainability*

Among the participants from Pakistan many agreed that culture and traditions are an integral part of life in Pakistan. Hence, it might be better to articulate and see sustainability through that lens. Participants viewed sustainability from both environmental and societal perspective, understanding that people cannot thrive without the planet and vice versa. There was an understanding of shared responsibility to sustain their environment in order to sustain their community, as illustrated in the following way:

The concept of sustainability is closely tied to people's lives... As a result, there is a strong emphasis on using water carefully, avoiding food waste, planting trees, and supporting local communities. In economic terms, these actions create positive externalities, since people contribute to sustainability indirectly through everyday practices. (SP2, p.7)

This perspective reflected a view rooted in effortless everyday practices. As one participant mentioned, the way to go forward might mean going back to older traditions, where urbanization was slower and resources were used responsibly (NP1). One participant shared an example from the village they come from that shows how things were done without leaning into the fancy jargon:

I often give this example that even if we don't put everything into sustainability jargon, but a lot of the practices that we do are built in sustainable since our grandparents. My village might appear to have some kind of advanced waste separation or collection system, but there is nothing like that. Most of the organic waste goes directly to the cattle in the household, and this practice is simply built in. Nobody told them, nobody guided them, and nobody introduced it with sustainability jargon. The bins are not decorated or color-coded; they are just ordinary bins. Organic waste is collected and either fed to the cattle or taken to the fields. Everyone keeps a bag filled with plastic bags for reuse. These kinds of practices have been embedded for years, and as my grandparents used to say, we were already doing this'. (SP4, p.6)

While these traditional practices illustrated how sustainability is understood in day-to-day life, Pakistani (study) participants also shared that sustainable behavior did not exist in isolation but were strengthened or discouraged through social dynamics and connective norms. Participants agreed that social pressures dictate how they behave as they feel that if they do not align with

social norms they will be judged by other members of society, this hinders them from opting for certain sustainable behaviors. Social conformity acts as a barrier to sustainable practices. The need to maintain social image and align with community expectations overrides personal or environmental values.

But over there, it carries such a huge negative connotation. The perception is that if someone gets something second-hand, it's probably bad — like, 'Oh my God, what is this person doing?' I feel like if I did that, people would talk about it. Yes, it was societal pressure: even if I bought something from Liberty or, you know, from Landa Bazar, I would never tell anybody because I would feel like they were going to judge me for it. That judgmental attitude is very strong. (SP1, p.23)

This negative connotation became positive when the term was changed from secondhand to preloved. The shift in language reframed the practice from one associated with scarcity or stigma to one that carried emotional value and care (SP4). Another common pattern seen as culturally rooted was the need to transfer responsibility from the individual to institutions such as government (NP2, NP3, NP4). This reflects cultural attitudes towards authority and individual responsibility in Pakistan. They see themselves as following a higher authority who carry the prime responsibility of being the change drivers, while minimizing their individual accountability. This is illustrated by the following quotation, "So, I mean it's more like my home is clean and that is my business, but outside if the society, if the street is not clean, that is none of my business. That is municipal's business." (NP1, p.6)

These traditions, social pressures and shared meaning all make up the cultural norms and values that shape how sustainability in Pakistan is embedded, and that in turn shapes how sustainability communication is perceived. Sustainability communication is therefore interpreted through collective values, conformity norms, and institutional trust, rather than solely through individual choice.

#### ***4.4.3 Comparison: Finland and Pakistan***

As established through data analysis, sustainability in Finland and Pakistan is shaped by very different cultural values and social expectations. Individual autonomy, public discourse and shared societal norms emphasized protection of nature and wellbeing of people among Finnish

participants. However, individualistic thinking and perceptions were evident in their responses as they formed independent views on what truly mattered and could they make any contribution in overcoming a said challenge. On the other hand, Pakistani participants grounded sustainability in cultural traditions, community expectations, and hierarchical social structures. For them sustainable practices stemmed from passed down traditions or shaped by social conformity. These cultural values, social norms, and collective beliefs develop the understanding of sustainability among participants from both countries.

Overall, the findings section helps us understand that sustainability is not a generalizable concept but a construct that is understood through cultural and social nuances. Even though both countries value evidence backed, verifiable communication, what counted as strong evidence, varied across both countries. Participant accounts show how they engage and understand sustainability needs based on their traditions, social pressures, and cultural values. These dictate how they associate credibility and relevance to sustainability marketing communications, shaping their perceptions.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

### 5.1 Research summary and reflection

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how cultural values shaped consumers' perceptions of credibility and relevance in sustainability marketing communication across Finland and Pakistan. This purpose was achieved through the exploration of shared meanings constructed in a cultural group, to help explain what is understood to be credible and meaningful across Finland and Pakistan, as these guide how communication is perceived. Finland and Pakistan were chosen for this comparative study due to the culturally distinct environment as defined by Hofstede's 6D model (Hofstede Insights, 2022), and to provide a representative picture of differences between Western and non-Western societies. While cultural implications in perception and impact of marketing communication have been studied significantly, there is limited research on this field with a specific focus on sustainability marketing communication. This research emphasizes this specific focus to contribute to an in-depth understanding of the dynamic between cultural sensitivities and effective sustainability marketing communication. To address this, the main research question was used to guide this research, *'How does culture shape consumers' perceptions of credibility and relevance towards sustainability marketing communications from international brands in Finland and Pakistan?'*

The literature review helped establish the relevance of sustainability marketing for businesses as it can contribute towards achieving triple bottom line goals (Hunt, 2017). It simultaneously revealed that even though the academic literature in this field grew there is still conceptual fragmentation and lack of theoretical depth (Lunde, 2018). Especially, a cross-cultural balance was underrepresented in existing studies as research on culture and consumers has predominantly focused on Western countries and not developing countries (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010; Narula & Desore, 2016; Shavitt & Barnes, 2020).

In response to this gap, the theoretical foundation of this research builds upon literature that conceptualizes culture and how it is experienced by a group of people constructing shared meaning through which they interpret information (Hall, 1997; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009), alongside research on sustainability marketing communication and its evolution, encompassing both environmental and social marketing (Belz et al., 2025; Abutaleb & El-Bassiouny, 2020). This

foundation is further developed through studies underlining how credibility and meaningfulness shape the interpretation of these messages (Lock & Seele, 2017; Szabo & Webster, 2020; Rausch & Kopplin, 2021; Ruthven, 2021). As the study considers culture at a national level, Hofstede's 6D framework for national cultural values (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010), is utilized in this research as a sensitizing framework, where it provides structure to understand national culture but does not dictate the findings, allowing themes to emerge from participant accounts.

The empirical section of this study adopted a comparative qualitative approach, which was fitting for this study as it explores a cross-cultural narrative, and the qualitative approach enables a thorough comprehension of perceptions and subjective interpretations. An abductive approach guided this process as findings were used to inform and add depth to theoretical understanding. To conduct this comparison, focus groups were conducted, two focus groups from each country, with a mix of sustainability-focused and neutral individuals ranging from 20 to 40 years of age. The focus group used a cultural and linguistic approach as it allows focus on shared meanings and consumer culture instead of individuals (Catterall & Maclaran, 2006).

Following the first proposed sub-question, *'What are the differences and similarities between how consumers in Finland and Pakistan interpret relevance and credibility of sustainability marketing communications?'*, the findings demonstrated that both Finnish and Pakistani participants valued detailed, honest and clear information that was backed by verifiable evidence and alignment of corporate claims and real action. Emotional appeals and local impact were also valued. Beyond these commonalities, their judgment of truth and meaningfulness was shaped by distinct indicators. In Finland mistrust arose from oversaturation of available information, whereas in Pakistan it was due to a lack of awareness. Finland measured trust and connection through data and high transparency while Pakistan viewed credibility through visible change in their communities and surroundings, and when information was backed by regulatory bodies and influential figures. They were more likely to find it meaningful if it reflected their cultural values, socially accepted actions and proximal issues.

These differences were understood through the second sub-research question *'What specific cultural and contextual factors help explain these differences or similarities in consumers' perceptions of sustainability marketing communication?'*, the findings show that culture, socio-

economic conditions and lived experiences dictated what they found relevant and credible, these contributing factors are shown in Table 10.

**Table 10.**

*Factors shaping perceptions of sustainability marketing communication among Pakistani and Finnish consumers*

<b>Key Factors</b>	<b>Finland</b>	<b>Pakistan</b>
Individualism/collectivism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent thinking &amp; decision making</li> <li>• Sustainability issues that allow personal agency, feel more relevant</li> <li>• Sustainability issues recognized by immediate social circle feel more relevant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social conformity</li> <li>• Fear of social judgement</li> <li>• Collective benefit is valued (family and community-oriented sustainability marketing communication)</li> </ul>
Power distance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likely to question sustainability claims</li> <li>• High preference for open and transparent sustainability marketing communication</li> <li>• Prefer third-party verification</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High social class divide shapes access to sustainability</li> <li>• Trust in top-down sustainability marketing communication</li> <li>• Responsibility lies with government/regulatory for sustainability solutions</li> </ul>

Economic conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong infrastructure to support everyday sustainability – not a luxury</li> <li>• Reuse and recycling actions are value driven, not to save costs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainability is a luxury; focus on basic needs</li> <li>• Sustainability actions stem from cost cutting and resource optimization</li> </ul>
Informational/educational awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High awareness and access to information</li> <li>• Critical assessment of sustainability claims</li> <li>• Familiarity with greenwashing/Higher Skepticism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited awareness</li> <li>• Limited access to education depending on class divide</li> <li>• Moderate Skepticism</li> </ul>

These differences driven by certain socio-cultural factors as shown in Table 10, distinguished the type of sustainability communication each country prioritized. Finnish participants showed acceptance of higher individual responsibility and agency in alignment with low power distance and individualistic societies supporting the earlier observations made by De Mooij & Hofstede, (2011) and Rinne et al. (2012). They had high awareness of global environmental issues due to extensive public discourse, while social issues emerged only from their everyday environment. On the contrary, Pakistani participants leaned towards collective social benefit that reflects Abdulrazak and Quoquab' (2018) finding of sustainable consumerism in developing countries, common in collectivist societies (Shavitt & Barnes, 2020), where cultural norms and community expectations shape individual choices (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Responsibility for sustainability was associated with governmental institutions, that is the norm in moderate power distance societies (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Their understanding of sustainability was based on issues encountered in their immediate social context, rather than high awareness of global issues, largely due to their socio-economic realities and minimal information exposure.

Answering the main research question, the findings present a backdrop for understanding of how national culture and socio-economic conditions shape the perception of sustainability marketing communication but also sets the narrative for what consumers across diverse groups expect from companies to focus on. It informs that credibility and meaningfulness are not universal across the globe but are defined through shared narratives and lived realities. However, beyond the critical role of cultural values, economic conditions and access to information also emerge as key contributors in shaping these perceptions. These interact with Hofstede's values, such as uncertainty avoidance, indulgence vs restraint and power distance, suggesting the need for further exploration of such factors in tandem with cultural theories. As factors such as lack of resources and low economic stability can promote restraint within a society, as well as higher power distance and uncertainty avoidance within members of society. Not only do these findings add to the existing literature but also provide practical insights for international companies to curate sustainability communication that is sensitive to a country's cultural structure and reflective of local realities, to establish trust, connection and encourage actual change.

## **5.2 Theoretical contributions**

Theoretical contribution is described as the generation of new knowledge in relation to existing theory, and the change in knowledge prior to and after the completion of the study defines the significance of the contribution (Rouse et al., 2025). This study presents this change by conceptualizing consumer perception as a process (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2013) and showing how cultural differences guide this process in response to global sustainability marketing communication. Hence, it adds to the understanding of three theoretical concepts: sustainability marketing, culture, and consumer perception.

To begin, this study contributes to the theory of sustainability marketing by providing a cross-cultural context across Finland and Pakistan, two culturally distinct countries (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2022). The volume of academic studies focusing on western contexts is much higher than the global south especially when it comes to consumer behaviour and the role of culture (Vighnesh et al., 2022; De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010). Hence, by comparing Pakistan with Finland the study contributes representation for non-western context. The results of the study depict that standardized communication is less likely to secure credibility or relevance when they

do not resonate with locally shared meanings. This shows that the consumer perception journey is culturally mediated.

Furthermore, this research bridges the gap between cultural explanations and underlying perceptual mechanisms by adapting a critical realist stance (Bhaskar, 2008) and extending Hofstede's framework to be interpretive rather than being led by deterministic values. Hofstede's cultural dimensions explain cultural differences in society, such as consumer behaviour (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011; Shavitt & Barnes, 2020; Ur Rahman et al., 2021), but this study utilizes the dimensions as values constructing social meaning. This extends its use from score-based comparisons to an interpretive account of how values operate in evaluation, shifting the focus from consumer behavior to the comprehension of the process behind consumer responses. In addition to this, the study contributes to the Sustainability marketing theory as well, by showing that credibility, relevance are not universally or intrinsically held but culturally understood, through lived experiences and social interaction (Hall 1997; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009).

These differences in understanding of credibility and relevance across Finland and Pakistan were explained through cultural and contextual factors. The dimensions showing noticeable divergence were individualism versus collectivism and power distance (Hofstede Insights, 2022). These differences influenced how each society positioned itself in relation to responsibility, authority, and social conformity. This shows that consumers are not just responding to available information, but evaluate it based on their socio-cultural narratives, to understand what evidence is and what holds value. For participants in Finland, evidence was understood to be facts, data, and full disclosure, and responsibility was taken at a personal level; hence, they gravitated more towards initiatives and causes where they saw space and possibility for direct contribution. Responsibility for Pakistani participants was something that lies with the government and regulatory bodies, with their interest lying in tangible benefits in their immediate community. This points to the importance of context specific communication. When international brands communicate sustainability claims, the audience judges them depending on their alignment with their local values and verification cues (Jung, 2017; Lock & Seele, 2017; Verleye et al., 2023).

Ultimately, this research recognizes that these observed differences between Pakistan and Finland cannot be fully attributed to culture, as depicted by Hofstede's cultural values. Lived experiences,

socio-economic conditions, and access to information might also play a critical role in shaping perceptions. This allows for a more fluid, contextually embedded conceptualization of culture.

### **5.3 Managerial implications**

This study proposes four pillars on which international brands can build their sustainability communication that is globally coherent yet locally resonant, credible across different evaluative logics, meaningful across cultures, and inclusive of societal inequalities.

#### ***5.3.1 Pillar 1: Local resonance***

Based on this study, it is important for marketing managers to understand that sustainability marketing communication cannot be replicated across different cultural groups and expect to have same response. Consumers do not approach this information from a point of neutrality but associate it with their shared experiences and lived reality. This means investing in market insight (focus groups and surveys) and stakeholder collaboration to ensure campaigns reflect how sustainability is understood in each cultural context. This market insight can be developed through market focus group, lowering the risk of misalignment and improving brand connectivity while still maintaining overarching sustainability goals.

#### ***5.3.2 Pillar 2: Culturally situated credibility***

As this study shows, credibility is not a universal criterion but is understood differently across cultures and it guides the consumer's perception. In individualistic, low power distance context, credibility is associated with high transparency with full disclosure, third-party verification, and measurable data. Hence, communications should preferably be linked with proper authentic documentation and clear reporting with verifiable data which consumers can evaluate and avoid selective disclosure focusing solely on positives. However, in such contexts there can be oversaturation of information contributing to mistrust. Companies therefore need to practice discernment in reporting and avoid excessive or repetitive claims.

In collectivist societies and moderate power distance, credibility tied with top-down dissipation of information and visible change in their local context, for them information seems more credible when it involves governmental collaboration, authority endorsement and systematic change. Hence, to ensure they need to design a balanced marketing mix between robust reporting and local narratives, for that businesses can collaborate with local governments and non-governmental organization working locally and try to contribute towards actual grassroot level change in their

society, in countries such as Pakistan. Communication strategies should therefore be built around how credibility is understood, not assumed. This can curb skepticism and unintentional greenwashing.

### **5.3.3 Pillar 3: Culturally negotiated meaning**

Communication is not only informational but symbolic (Hall, 1997). According to this study, this calls for communication alignment to what the members of a cultural group find meaningful. For example, one participant from collectivist society mentioned reframing ‘secondhand hand’ as ‘preloved’ can help reduce stigma by connecting the idea with care and emotional value rather than economic necessity. As for another example, there was higher preference for emotional appeals in one society while the other valued innovative solutions. Understanding of such nuanced difference across different countries is crucial. Marketing managers could focus on local aspirations, social identities and shared expectations, through uniquely designed and situated content for higher alignment.

### **5.3.4 Pillar 4: Contextual realities**

As shown in this study, it is high importance for marketing managers to understand that the culture does not operate in isolation from other segregating factors such as socio-economic conditions and social inequality between members of the cultural group. By accounting for this they can ensure that messages resonate not only culturally but also with the lived realities of diverse consumer groups. In practice, this study shows that it can be achieved through avoiding use of technical jargon, relying on emotional local stories and share sustainability communication angled through cost-saving which might make the message resonate more with an audience that is impacted by economic constraint and does not have widespread access to information and education. Hence, they need to account for these differences when developing their marketing communication.

## **5.4 Limitations and avenues for future research**

As with all qualitative studies, certain common limitations emerge in this research. The first limitation emerges in the small sample group where there were only eight participants from each country, allowing for narrative depth, but limiting the generalizability of this study. Hence, this study cannot grasp the heterogeneity even within same cultural group based on region, economic conditions or education level. Hence, these findings can only be viewed as a reflective representation of this data set rather than generalizable at a national level. Furthermore, even

though focus groups were an appropriate choice given the focus on shared cultural narratives, they may also have contributed to conformity or hindered the emergence of more divergent views. These focus groups were conducted online which may have led to limited interactional depth. Generalizability is further reduced given that this is a cross-sectional study where data has been collected at one specific point in time.

The next limitation stems from the use of Hofstede's cultural dimensions as guiding structures rather than fixed dimensions defining culture, resulting in interpretive insights that requires further validation. Additionally, even though the study acknowledges the emergence of contextual factors and socio-economic conditions such as information accessibility and financial constraints as factors shaping perceptions of sustainability marketing, it does not explore these concepts in-depth.

These limitations set a fruitful backdrop for future research. Future research can utilize different methodological approaches adding to the depth and generalizability of the findings. One way to do this would be to include other countries from the global north and south, exploring cultural settings beyond Pakistan and Finland. They can also choose to look at regional differences within a cultural context. This can help us understand whether credibility and relevance are understood similarly across cultures or new meanings emerge. Subsequently, researchers can also increase generalizability by employing mixed methods or quantitative research addressing specific cultural values, to strengthen causal understanding of cultural mechanisms in context of consumer perceptions of sustainability marketing communication. Another way to support generalizability would be to conduct longitudinal studies, to understand long term evolution of these perceptions of sustainability marketing communication.

Lastly, future research could address other emergent factors in this study such as socio-economic conditions, environmental awareness, access to information and trust in institutions. They could adopt a more holistic approach that integrates these factors into cultural frameworks to gain a fuller understanding of how perceptions of sustainability communication vary across distinct societies. This research can intersect with various disciplines as a collaborative effort to explore how lived realities intersect with culture.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Focus group discussion guide

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#### Research Focus Group Discussion Guide

##### First inform about following:

- Brief introduction of topic
- Thesis objective
- Privacy information and participant rights
- Permission to start recording and transcribing

##### Opening Note:

Thank you for participating. Today we will be talking about how sustainability marketing communication and how people perceive it. There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in your perspectives and experiences. Please feel free to share examples or experiences.

As we move through the discussion, I may ask a few specific questions to help explore certain points or clarify ideas that come up. Please feel free to jump in at any time if you'd like to add something or respond to what someone else has said. To begin, I'd like to go around and have each of you briefly share your name and what the term *sustainability* means to you personally (*Values/Ideas*).

You can take a minute or two to share your perspective.

##### Guiding Questions:

1. How is sustainability viewed or practiced where you live?
2. What environmental issues feel most relevant or important in your community? (*e.g climate change, loss of biodiversity, or deforestation*) Why do you think those matter most?
3. What social issues feel most relevant or important in your community? (*e.g child labour, economic inequality, or gender inequality*) Why do you think those matter most?
4. How do people react when businesses talk about sustainability? (*for e.g. a brands promote their product as eco-friendly*)

- Are they usually indifferent, interested or doubtful?
5. Have you ever seen a company, either in your country or from abroad, share a message about sustainability that really stuck with you or that you liked? Can you tell us about it?"
  6. What influences the way people understand these messages? Are there traditions, ways of thinking, or shared habits that might explain those reactions?  
*Show communication from Unilever one by one (3 images in total)*  
Adapted from Unilever. (n.d.). *Sustainability*. <https://www.unilever.com/sustainability/>.  
Copyright 2025 by Unilever. Used for research purposes.
  7. What ideas or messages do you feel this communication is trying to convey?
    - What made it resonate or fall short?
    - Does this message make you feel motivated to act or care? If so, how?
    - If you had to change/reword this communication what is the first change that you would make and why?
  8. What could a company like Unilever do to make their messages feel more relatable and authentic to people in Finland/Pakistan? *Maybe different wording, or focus on different values?*
  9. Looking back at today's discussion, what common ideas or shared understandings stood out to you about how people in your community see sustainability communication?
  10. Is there something we have not discussed yet about sustainability marketing communication that you would like to share?

## Appendix B. Interview consent form

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### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Consumer Perceptions of Sustainability Marketing Communication

#### Consent for participation in a research study

I have been requested to participate in the research study identified above. I have received information about the study in writing and have had the opportunity to ask questions from the researcher(s) conducting the study.

I understand that participating in the study is voluntary. I am aware that I have the right to refuse to participate and the right to withdraw from the study permanently or for a temporary period at any time and without giving a reason. I understand that any collected data in the course of the study will remain confidential.

I hereby give my voluntary consent for participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Place and date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name in block letters

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phone number

\_\_\_\_\_  
Email address

## Appendix C. Participant Information Sheet

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### ETHICS COMMITTEE OF THE TAMPERE REGION

#### Information Sheet

**Master's Thesis** – How Cultural Mechanisms Shape Consumer Perceptions of Sustainability Marketing Communication

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores how culture shapes the perceptions of consumers towards sustainability marketing perceptions. After reading this information sheet, you will have the opportunity to ask any questions you may have. You will be separately requested to provide consent for participating in the study.

#### Purpose of the research

This study sets out to explore how cultural context across distinct groups can shape the perception of sustainability marketing communication as filtered through factors such as national cultural values, shared meanings, perceived credibility, and perceived relevance. It addresses the lack of resonance of business-led sustainability marketing communications among culturally distinct audiences globally. By addressing this gap, this study can contribute to insights that can help international brands communicate sustainability more effectively across cultures.

#### Description of the process

The study will include focus group discussions for which participants will be chosen through purposive and quota sampling. The participation is voluntary and the participant will receive no financial compensation for participating. During this discussion session, you will be asked to view examples of sustainability marketing communications and discuss, in a group setting, your thoughts and experiences regarding the meaning, credibility, and personal relevance of these messages within your national culture. The discussion will be conducted online via a secure platform and will be recorded for transcription and analysis.

#### Procedures for collecting research data

The participants will be invited to an online group interview on Microsoft Teams, with groups organized based on your country of long-term residence, specifically Finland or Pakistan. The interview will be conducted at the group level with the presence of a researcher and a moderator whose purpose will be to ensure the session runs smoothly, achieves its research objectives, and fosters a productive, comfortable environment. The meeting will be recorded, and the resulting data will be transcribed, coded, and analysed for research purposes.

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[www.tuni.fi](http://www.tuni.fi)

**Potential risks and benefits of participation**

You will not receive any direct benefit from participating in the study, financial or otherwise and there are no significant risks involved. The procedures and methods used during this study do not involve health risks, social risks, financial risks and risks relating to personal data breaches.

**Data confidentiality, processing and storage**

All personal data collected during the study will be processed in compliance with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the data protection laws of Finland. Data about individual participants will not be disclosed to external persons. Data will be generated through focus group interviews that include audio and video recordings, transcriptions, and photographs. These materials will be stored in digital formats (.docx, .mp3, .mp4, and .jpeg).

The data will be processed solely by the Principal Investigator, Master's student Michelle Arif, under the supervision of University Lecturer and Academic Director Malla Mattila at Tampere University. The Principal Investigator is responsible for the secure handling, storage, and deletion of all data. Personal identifiers will be removed during transcription, and no information that could reveal participants' identities will be shared with any third party. All research findings will be reported in aggregate form to ensure full anonymity. Data will not be used for any other purpose than this thesis. The data will be stored on One Drive for the duration of the study and after the point of submission. Once the thesis is accepted the data will be deleted from everywhere.

**Protecting the privacy of participants in research papers/publications**

The research materials and data collected during the study will be retained by Tampere University till the submitted thesis has been evaluated, after which they will be securely destroyed.

**Voluntary participation**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Refusal to participate or discontinuing participation at any time will not affect any treatment you may later receive. The data collected about the participant up to the point of withdrawal will remain in the study database and may not be removed. Written consent will be taken from each participant before the focus group interviews are conducted.

**Privacy protection in the context of research papers and communicating about the study**

The privacy and anonymity of participants will be strictly protected by anonymising any data that may lead to identification of participants.

The results of the study will be reported in the finalised approved version of thesis which will be published at Tampere University.

#### **Use of data for non-research/later research purposes**

Participants will be requested for consent for recording the focus group interviews, as well as transcribing the recordings. There is no plan to use these transcriptions and recordings for any future studies or research purposes other than the one in question. It will also not be used for non-research purposes. After the research is complete and thesis is accepted by Tampere University, all transcripts and recordings will be destroyed.

#### **Inquiries**

Please direct all inquiries about the study to Principal Investigator, Master's student, Michelle Arif

██████████

#### **Researchers' contact details**

Name: Michelle Arif

Unit: Faculty of Management and Business

Phone number: ██████████

Email address: ██████████

#### **Thesis supervisors' contact details**

Name: Malla Mattila

Unit: Faculty of Management and Business

Phone number: ██████████

Email address: ██████████

## Appendix D. Privacy Notice

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### Privacy Notice – Scientific Research

This privacy notice describes how your personal data will be processed in compliance with data protection legislation. In data protection legislation, the term “data subject” refers to the person whose personal data are processed. In this privacy notice, data subject is referred to as “you” and controller as “we”.

This privacy notice may be updated or edited if necessary. You will be notified of any significant changes as mandated by data protection legislation.

This privacy notice came into force on 29/10/2025.

#### 1. Controller

The controller of the research project is:

An individual researcher. The research project will be conducted by the researcher identified below.

Name: Michelle Arif

Contact information : [REDACTED]

The contact person for questions about data processing is Michelle Arif, Masters’ student at Tampere University, who can be reached at [REDACTED]

If you have general questions about data protection at Tampere University, please email our Data Protection Officer at [dpo@tuni.fi](mailto:dpo@tuni.fi).

#### 2. Scope and purpose of data processing

Thesis title: How Cultural Mechanisms Shape Consumer Perceptions of Sustainability Marketing Communication

This is a one-time research, masters’ thesis study that will last during the academic year 2025–2026.

Your personal data will be processed as part of a thesis study. The purpose of processing your personal data is to conduct the research specified above.

The research project explores how national culture (Finland vs. Pakistan) shapes consumer perceptions of sustainability marketing communications through the mediating factors of shared meanings, perceived credibility, and perceived relevance. Data for the research project will be generated qualitatively, through focus group interviews that will include audio and video recordings, and photographs. These are stored as docx files, .mp3/mp4 recordings.

During this research project, personal data will be processed by the Principal Investigator, Master’s student Michelle Arif under the supervision of University Lecturer, Academic Director Malla Mattila. The principal investigator (lead researcher) is responsible for overseeing the research project.

The research findings, reported in aggregate form so that individual research participants cannot be identified, are intended to be published in a master's thesis by the Principal Investigator, Master's student Michelle Arif.

### 3. Lawful basis for processing personal data

The lawful basis for processing your personal data is:

- consent (of the data subject)
- controller's legal obligation
- protection of vital interests
- a task carried out in the public interest or the exercise of official authority
  - scientific or historical research or compilation of statistics
  - archiving of research and cultural heritage material
- legitimate interests of the controller or a third party

### 4. Sources and types of personal data

Depending on the circumstances, we may collect personal data either directly from you or from other sources. We will collect data from:

- you as the data subject

We will process the following types of personal data:

General personal data: As direct identifier: Names of study participant, email address, voice and video recording)

As indirect identifier: Gender, age and long term country of residence

We will process data on the following categories of data subjects:

- employees  students  research participants  research staff  others, please specify: \_\_\_\_

### 5. Transfer and disclosure of personal data

- Your personal data will not be transferred outside the EU/EEA.
- Your personal data will not be regularly disclosed to other controllers.

Transcription will be generated using an automated AI tool (Microsoft Teams Live Transcription). This is a technical process intended to speed up data preparation. The final review and analysis of data will be performed internally by the Principal Investigator, Master's student Michelle Arif.

## 6. Protecting personal data

Your personal data will be protected using appropriate technical and organisational measures. Your data will be protected through technical measures, including antivirus software, firewalls and regular software updates. Your data will also be protected through organisational measures. Access to data is restricted. The Principal Investigator, Master's student Michelle Arif is the only user who has access your personal data. The access to your personal data requires to log in with a username and password or, in some cases, with multi-factor authentication.

If necessary, we will implement additional safeguards to protect data, such as separate storage locations.

Any physical documents will be safeguarded by storing them in locked facilities.

Material will be:

- collected with direct identifiers
- collected without direct identifiers
- pseudonymised after collection
- stored with personally identifiable information, which is necessary for the following reasons: \_\_\_\_

During this research project, your data will also be protected through the following measures: All recordings, transcription and the key linking real names to pseudonyms will be stored on a secure, multi-factor authenticated university-managed cloud server (OneDrive). Access is limited to the Principal Investigator, Master's student Michelle Arif and if requested, the Master's thesis supervisor Malla Mattila.

## 7. Retention period for personal data

We will retain your personal data for only as long as necessary, as determined on a case-by-case basis.

The retention period also depends on the requirements set out in data protection legislation. We will adhere to our Data Management Plan and all applicable legislation when determining the retention period of personal data.

Your personal data will be retained in accordance with the Tampere University's guidelines and statutory retention periods. After the master's thesis has been evaluated, the research records containing personal data, such as original recordings and identifiable information, will be destroyed. Anonymized transcripts containing no personal data will be retained by Tampere University for ten years for archival and future research purposes.

After the research project has been completed, the research records containing personal data will be:

- destroyed in their entirety
- anonymised and archived without personally identifiable information.
- archived with personally identifiable information.

## 8. Profiling and automated decision-making

We will not use your personal data for profiling or automated decision-making.

## 9. Data subjects' rights and how to exercise them

### Withdrawing consent

If your personal data is being processed based on your consent, you have the right to withdraw your consent at any time.

### Right to lodge a complaint with a supervisory authority

You have the right to lodge a complaint with a supervisory authority (Data Protection Ombudsman), if you believe that the processing of your personal data violates data protection legislation.

Office of the Data Protection Ombudsman

Contact: +358 29 56 66700

Email address: tietosuoja@om.fi