Sustainable Fashion Narratives:

A Cross-Cultural Comparative Analysis of Western Luxury and Indian Craft

by

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Abstract

Sustainable fashion resists stable definition. Theoretically contested and culturally differentiated, sustainable fashion emerges at the intersection of competing environmental imperatives, ethical obligations, and the disciplining exigencies of commercial capital. This study interrogates how sustainability is defined, communicated, and ideologically constructed across two distinct cultural formations within the fashion industry: Western luxury fashion and Indian craft-based fashion, through an examination of Instagram content published in 2025 by Stella McCartney (United Kingdom) and FabIndia (India). A corpus of 72 posts was subjected to reflexive thematic analysis, deploying inductive and deductive coding strategies alongside semantic and latent analysis to excavate the behind-the-communication logics and underlying ideological architectures that condition how meaning of sustainability is generated by each brand.

The findings demonstrate that sustainable fashion does not operate as a universally shared concept but as a series of culturally differentiated constructs, variably inflected by historical, economic, and epistemic formations. Stella McCartney articulates sustainability through explicit, measurable claims centred upon material innovation, animal welfare, and the cultivation of individual ethical consumption. FabIndia, by contrast, embeds sustainability implicitly within discourses of craft heritage, communal practice, and cultural continuity, frequently without recourse to sustainability as an explicit category of address. These divergent articulations illuminate deeper ideological asymmetries. Western sustainability is constituted through the logics of solutionism and consumer agency, whilst Indian sustainability emerges from historically sedimented practices of reuse, craft knowledge, and collective systems of value.

Notwithstanding these differences, both models converge in the transformation of sustainability into a market-facing discourse, shaped by the imperatives of visibility, aspiration, and brand positioning. The study advances a critical distinction between ‘performed sustainability’ and ‘ambient sustainability’, examining how existing institutional frameworks privilege explicit claims whilst overlooking practices that are embedded, tacit, and culturally grounded. The findings interrogate Eurocentric assumptions operative within sustainability discourse and call for a re-evaluation of whose

knowledge, labour, and material practices are accorded recognition as sustainable within the asymmetric structures of global fashion systems.

The study further theorises 'capital manipulation' and 'convenient recognition' as structurally reinforcing mechanisms through which sustainability communication is selectively filtered across both cultural contexts. A parallel gap is proposed between what brands communicate as sustainability and what they structurally practise, mediated by ‘affective purchasing’ a term this study introduces to describe the process through which sustainability is translated into identity and emotional resonance among audiences rather than structural information.

Keywords: Sustainable Fashion · Capital Manipulation · Performed Sustainability · Ambient Sustainability · Convenient Recognition · Affective Purchasing · Cross-Cultural Analysis · Fashion Solutionism · Instagram · Greenwashing · FabIndia · Stella McCartney

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Author's Name: Rupal Teotia

Date: 19 June 2026

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This dissertation was never just an academic exercise for me. Somewhere between the reading, rewriting, questioning, and unlearning, it became something far more personal. A quiet journey inward. A passion that opened doors I had long been searching for, and a space where I found parts of myself I had not yet named.

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This dissertation may carry my name, but it holds pieces of all of you within it. And somehow, this still does not feel like an ending. Only a beginning.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; where knowledge is free; where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls; where words come out from the depth of truth; where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection; where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way.

— Rabindranath Tagore (1910/1913, p. 27)

This vision of clarity, truth, and intellectual freedom stands in sharp contrast to the ambiguities that characterise contemporary sustainability discourse. Within the fashion industry, sustainability has been elevated to a central component of brand identity, rendering it one of the most visible and contested concepts in modern commercial culture. Sustainability is frequently invoked to signal ethical commitment, justify premium pricing, and cultivate consumer trust. However, the very conditions it purports to address (environmental degradation, labour exploitation, and supply chain opacity) remain largely unresolved. This study interrogates that disjunction.

The industry accounts for between 2 and 10 percent of global carbon emissions, depending on how it is measured. Conservative estimates place direct emissions at 2 to 8 percent (United Nations Environment Programme, 2019), while broader supply chain calculations rise to approximately 10 percent, surpassing the combined emissions of the shipping and aviation sectors (Bildirici et al., 2025). These figures rely on complex global supply chains that stretch across multiple countries, subcontractors, and tiers of production. As these networks expand, accountability fragments and verification becomes increasingly difficult. Labour conditions, material sourcing, and environmental impacts are rarely tracked end-to-end, and the regulatory frameworks within which brands operate do not require such transparency. Brands therefore benefit from a structural opacity that shields harmful practices from scrutiny, with limited incentive to dismantle it.

1.1 Sustainability as a contested concept

It is precisely within this context of structural opacity that the language of sustainability has gained its commercial value. Under growing scrutiny from governments, regulatory bodies, NGOs, and certification organisations over the industry's environmental and social impact, fashion brands have increasingly adopted sustainability as a means of managing reputational risk rather than dismantling the conditions that produced it. This study reveals that within contemporary branding practice, ethical claims and commercial interests have become deeply entangled: sustainability deployed not as a structural commitment but as a communicative strategy, calibrated to audience expectation and market positioning. The result is a discourse that circulates widely without producing stable meaning. Despite the widespread normalisation of sustainability language across the industry, fashion narratives have not produced a shared or consistent cross-cultural understanding of what sustainability actually requires (Henninger et al., 2016; Patara & Nayak, 2025). This instability is not simply a matter of definition: it extends into the globally structured supply chains through which fashion operates, where labour conditions, environmental standards, and accountability mechanisms vary dramatically across contexts and remain largely invisible to the consumers sustainability communication addresses (Majumdar et al., 2020; Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2022).

As a result, sustainable fashion narratives function as a form of constructed uncertainty: they draw audiences in and encourage engagement while withholding any stable resolution. It is within these constructed layers and 'twists,' produced by fashion brands, that the concept itself becomes further fragmented and increasingly difficult to evaluate. Consumers are often unable to make independent, informed judgements (Dabas and Whang, 2022; James and Bardey, 2025), leading them to accept brand claims as presented.

Major periods of disruption, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Rana Plaza disaster, briefly expose these contradictions (Majumdar et al., 2020; Khurana, 2022). Although critical awareness surfaces among the public and media in these moments, brands rapidly resort to reconfiguring their narratives, generating new justificatory logics that deepen ambiguity within sustainability discourse rather than resolve it. This dynamic exposes a deeper problem: sustainability claims may function not as commitments but as constructions: meaningful in appearance, hollow in practice, and ideologically significant in what and how they conceal across different cultural and demographic contexts, until the construction itself becomes so normalised it goes unquestioned.

The existing literature establishes that sustainability is not a neutral concept. It is shaped by economic systems and ideological assumptions that determine both its meaning and its beneficiaries, and structurally produced within intersecting commercial and cultural interests rather than existing as a universal standard (Mignolo, 2007; Patara & Nayak, 2025). Accordingly, questions of what constitutes sustainability, and who holds the authority to define it, are not peripheral but foundational. Existing scholarship has begun to surface these tensions, questioning the assumptions embedded within dominant sustainability frameworks, the cultural contexts from which they emerge, and the practices and knowledge systems they fail to recognise (Henninger et al., 2016; Mignolo, 2007; Patara & Nayak, 2025). Yet despite this critical turn, the frameworks through which sustainability is measured, certified, and communicated (including certification systems, disclosure indices, and institutional standards) remain largely Western in origin and Eurocentric in effect (Mignolo, 2007; Patara & Nayak, 2025).

Therefore, what is excluded from these frameworks is not simply unsustainable practice, but forms of sustainability that have long existed yet remain invisible within the systems currently used to define and measure sustainability itself.

1.2 Cultural difference in sustainability communication

This invisibility does not operate uniformly: it is structured by cultural difference. Within sustainable fashion specifically, the gap between what is recognised and what exists becomes most pronounced when Western and non-Western sustainability frameworks are placed in direct relation. For instance, Western approaches are found in this study to be grounded in ideas of individual responsibility, technological innovation, and consumer agency, positioning the consumer as the primary agent of ethical change (Carranza et al., 2023; Dabas and Whang, 2022). South Asian sustainability, by contrast, is revealed to be deeply embedded in practices of reuse, repair, and craft-based production, many of which, as existing literature illustrates, predate the formal naming of sustainability in fashion by decades, and in some cases by centuries (Khurana, 2022; Sandhu, 2020). Yet these practices have been consistently recorded marginalised within dominant sustainability narratives.

1.3 Social media and brand visibility

This study demonstrates that South Asian and Western brands communicate sustainability in distinct ways shaped by their respective cultural contexts, and that these differences carry ideological significance. Nevertheless, a striking finding emerges: both operate within a shared platform-driven logic to create sustainable narratives that privileges visibility over verification. Social media as a platform has been predominantly adopted by both cultures and has become a primary site through which sustainability narratives are produced and circulated, with Instagram, in particular, functioning as a key platform through which fashion brands communicate sustainability commitments to consumer audiences at scale (Testa et al., 2021; Kolotouchkina et al., 2025). Crucially, as existing literature indicates, Instagram has a tendency to privilege images and emotion over evidence and accountability, elevating aspiration and aesthetic appeal above substantive verification (Testa et al., 2021).

The expansion of sustainability communication through these platforms has intensified the gap between what is committed and what is enacted. Branding teams across both cultural contexts (Stella McCartney and FabIndia), as this study finds, selectively curate what is made visible and what is withheld, constructing ethical identities through imagery and language without corresponding structural change. As a result, what audiences encounter is often a mediated representation of sustainability, perceived by consumers as a sense of ethical alignment rather than verifiable practice. This is the process this study terms 'affective purchasing': the conversion, by brands, of sustainability into identity, aspiration, and emotional resonance rather than structural information.

As sustainability becomes an ethical and emotional signal rather than a standard, the boundary between substantive practice and strategic positioning becomes increasingly difficult to discern (Testa et al., 2021; Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024). This dynamic points toward a deeper communicative logic, operating across both Western and South Asian contexts within which certain forms of sustainability communication are consistently rewarded with visibility and legitimacy, while others are systematically overlooked. This study conceptualises this as 'convenient recognition,' examined in detail in the section that follows.

1.4 Research gap and contribution

The pattern this study terms 'convenient recognition' is visible both in the opacity of global supply chains and in the limited cross-cultural scholarship addressing sustainability communication demands sustained academic attention, not simply acknowledgement. Much of the literature remains centred on Western markets and consumer behaviour, with comparatively limited attention to underlying cultural analyses of how and why sustainability is communicated across diverse contexts (Henninger et al., 2016; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; James and Bardey, 2025). While international initiatives, such as the Ethical Fashion Initiative established under the UN International Trade Centre, have sought to address this imbalance by foregrounding artisans from developing countries within sustainable fashion systems (United Nations Environment Programme, 2019), these efforts have not fully translated into equivalent shifts in academic inquiry. Studies that engage with South Asian contexts continue to rely predominantly on Western theoretical frameworks, thereby reproducing the very epistemological hierarchies they aim to interrogate (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Khurana, 2022; Maheshwari et al., 2025).

A structural tendency is visible across dominant sustainability frameworks, including academic discourse (Henninger et al., 2016; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015), certification bodies such as GOTS (2023), and global institutional frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) and the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion (United Nations Environment Programme, 2019). Within these systems, practices that fit existing evaluative categories are readily legitimised, while those that fall outside them are excluded or overlooked, even when they may represent more grounded and enduring forms of sustainable living (Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024; Patara & Nayak, 2025). This tendency, as previously noted, operates across both institutional and communicative levels, shaping what counts as sustainability and what audiences are encouraged to see. Critically, this dynamic is not confined to Western systems. Within Indian craft-based sustainability, a parallel logic is observable: the knowledge, labour, and practices of marginalised artisan communities are mobilised for commercial and cultural visibility, while the artisans themselves (and the structural conditions of their work) remain outside the frame (Maheshwari et al., 2025; Sandhu, 2020; Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2022).

1.5 Research questions

Through a cross-cultural comparative analysis of Instagram content published in 2025, this study examines how sustainability is ideologically constructed across two deliberately contrasting cases: Stella McCartney, a UK-based luxury brand widely associated with ethical innovation, and FabIndia, an Indian brand rooted in traditional craft practices. Selected as what Denscombe (2014) terms "extreme instances," these cases are positioned to illuminate the ideological differences between Western and South Asian sustainability frameworks in their most analytically productive form.

These gaps and tensions converge into two research questions that structure this study:

RQ1. How do different cultural contexts (UK vs. India) define and express the concept of sustainable fashion?

RQ2. What cultural ideologies underpin these narratives, and how do they differ between Western luxury sustainability and Indian craft-based sustainability models?

1.6 Scope of the study

This study does not position FabIndia's sustainability narratives as inherently more sustainable than those of Stella McCartney. Rather, it demonstrates that the two brands are grounded in structurally and culturally distinct approaches to sustainability, making the field of debate more contested. Many of these distinctions remain underexamined, as discussed earlier.

FabIndia's model is rooted in longstanding craft traditions and community-based practices that align with the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability, yet it is not without its own contradictions. In India, cultural and political realities are deeply intertwined with the institutions and systems through which sustainability is enacted. The country's diverse socio-cultural contexts and enduring structural inequalities suggest that craft-led sustainability can be both authentically rooted and commercially entangled.

By contrast, Stella McCartney's approach is shaped largely by the demographic and cultural context of the United Kingdom, promoting an innovation-led model of sustainability centred on technological advancement and material innovation. While this approach offers significant opportunities, it also introduces its own limitations, tensions, and uncertainties.

At the level of communication, the study critically engages with both brands. It questions whether FabIndia fully recognises and strategically articulates the strengths embedded within South Asian traditional practices, and whether Stella McCartney meaningfully engages with ethical practices or incorporates them selectively within existing commercial frameworks.

While both operate within the same global systems of unequal power connected through supply chains, platform logic, and shared commercial imperatives, they occupy structurally different positions within those systems. It is this difference, and what it reveals about how sustainability narratives are framed, communicated, and ideologically constructed across cultural contexts, that this study sets out to examine.

1.7 Key concepts

Within dominant sustainability frameworks, visibility and articulation function as the primary markers of legitimacy. This study terms this mode 'performed sustainability': sustainability constructed and communicated for market consumption, requiring articulation, institutional verification, and public visibility. By contrast, in many cultural contexts, particularly in South Asia, sustainability exists as an embedded condition, present in the ways materials are selected, used, repaired, and recirculated, and carried through craft-based practices and intergenerational knowledge that predate the formal naming of sustainability by decades, and in some cases by centuries (Huggard & Choudhary, 2025; Khurana, 2022; Maheshwari et al., 2025). This study conceptualises this as 'ambient sustainability': sustainability that exists as part of cultural practice rather than requiring formal articulation or validation.

Although this distinction is analytically useful, the boundary between performed and ambient sustainability is not fixed. Ambient sustainability does not exist outside the commercial systems this study critiques. When craft practices are packaged as brand

propositions, circulated through digital platforms, and positioned within global markets, they are drawn at least partially into the same commercial logics that structure performed sustainability.

This produces what Rittel and Webber (1973) describe as a "wicked problem." Rather than existing as an alternative to performed sustainability, ambient sustainability can, when commercialised, become a more complex version of the same selective visibility it appears to resist: one that is more difficult to contest precisely because it carries the appearance of cultural authenticity (Mignolo, 2007; Maheshwari et al., 2025).

The commercial force driving this process is what this study terms 'capital manipulation': the selective mobilisation of environmental and ethical concern as a vehicle for commercial gain. It is the mechanism that determines what sustainability is commercially useful to communicate, operating across both Western innovation-led and South Asian craft-based contexts.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundation of the study, combining established frameworks with original concepts developed through the analysis. It draws on key theories from communication, cultural, and postcolonial scholarship namely framing theory (Entman, 1993), the semiotics of myth (Barthes, 1957/1984), the coloniality of power (Mignolo, 2007), epistemic erasure (Spivak, 1988), small-scale economics (Schumacher, 1973), and the social construction of value (Appadurai, 1986). Together, these theories provide the analytical lens for examining how sustainability is selected, constructed, valued, and unevenly recognised across global fashion systems.

Building on these foundations, the study introduces five original concepts: capital manipulation, performed sustainability, ambient sustainability, convenient recognition, and affective purchasing. These concepts identify how sustainability operates within commercial systems as both narrative and practice capturing the distinction between what is visibly articulated and what exists as embedded cultural knowledge. They also illuminate the mechanisms through which sustainability is selectively legitimised and emotionally mobilised within contemporary branding and digital platforms. As the study progresses, these concepts will emerge with greater clarity alongside specific situations, unleashing a deeper understanding of sustainable fashion's communicative dynamics.

Taken together, the established and original frameworks form an integrated analytical structure. The established theories explain how sustainability is framed, valued, and constrained by existing systems of knowledge and power, while the original concepts name and formalise what emerges from within those conditions as observable communicative and ideological patterns. This combined framework enables the study to examine sustainability not as a fixed concept, but as an ideologically constructed, commercially mediated, and unevenly recognised phenomenon.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Preface

The Brundtland Report (1987) institutionalised sustainability within a Western-dominated United Nations framework, reflecting the environmental preoccupations of Northern European policy culture and embedding them as the default international standard. The report defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This definition, while widely cited, emerged from a commission chaired by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland and drew primarily on Northern European environmental concerns: oil shocks, tropical forest depletion, and ozone layer concerns rather than incorporating diverse global epistemologies about environmental stewardship. Consequently, sustainability became framed as a universal concept while simultaneously reflecting specific Western environmental priorities, establishing what postcolonial scholars might term an epistemic hierarchy in which Northern knowledge systems dominate global sustainability discourse (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

Therefore, within sustainable fashion scholarship and industry practice specifically, what counts as sustainable globally has been disproportionately shaped by Western institutional priorities: carbon emissions measurement, material certification systems such as the Global Organic Textile Standard (2023), and supply chain disclosure indices such as the Fashion Transparency Index (Fashion Revolution, 2024) all designed primarily within and for Western industrial contexts. As Patara and Nayak (2025) argue, this has produced a definition of sustainable fashion in which non-Western practices are not actively excluded but are structurally unrecognised: they exist and function in the world but do not register within the measurement categories these certification and disclosure systems use to define what counts as sustainable. The result is less a level playing field than a legitimacy system whose standards were written by and for Western institutional actors, without reference to the knowledge systems and cultural practices it would later fail to recognise as valid (Mignolo, 2007; Patara & Nayak, 2025).

3.2 The cultural construction of sustainable fashion as contested and fragmented field of study

Sustainable fashion does not carry a single, stable meaning. Across cultural contexts and commercial systems, its definition shifts (Henninger et al., 2016; Patara & Nayak, 2025). When a term carries multiple, competing meanings, it becomes available for selective appropriation by those with commercial interests in its ambiguity. What sustainable fashion means is neither consistent across cultural contexts nor stable within them and it is precisely this instability that creates the conditions under which sustainability communication becomes vulnerable to 'capital manipulation': the selective mobilisation of real-world environmental and ethical concerns as vehicles for commercial gain by those in power, producing not greater clarity for consumers but strategically useful confusion.

This observation aligns with Entman's (1993) selective framing theory, which operates by highlighting certain aspects of a communication while obscuring others of equal or greater significance; what is concealed is frequently as analytically significant as what is declared. Capital manipulation, as this study uses the term, is not a synonym for deliberate deception. It is the structural condition produced when sustainability communication becomes so saturated with emotionally resonant but largely unverifiable claims that consumers lose the informational basis on which to distinguish genuine environmental commitment from its commercial imitation. In this condition, active deception becomes unnecessary because the system itself generates the confusion (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024) a dynamic this study examines across two contrasting cultural contexts: the United Kingdom, represented by Stella McCartney, and India, represented by FabIndia.

Adding to this tension, brand communication strategizes how they appear in the public to resonate emotionally with consumers, making ecological concern and ethical responsibility increasingly difficult to distinguish from their commercial substitutes (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015).

The real-world consequences of this become most visible in the attitude–behaviour gap. James and Bardey (2025) report that 80 per cent of Western Millennials claim never to consider environmental or human rights issues when purchasing clothing. These inconsistencies have been attributed not to apathy but to social desirability bias: sustainability performed discursively without translating into purchasing behaviour

(Dabas and Whang, 2022). Research consistently documents that Western consumers across both fast fashion and premium market segments report strong ethical intentions that do not translate into making purchasing decisions aligned with those intentions (James and Bardey, 2025; Henninger et al., 2016). Sustainability, this literature suggests, does not simply fail at the level of individual commitment; it fails at the level of how sustainability is communicated in the first place. A marketplace saturated with unverifiable, emotionally resonant claims actively incentivises further distortion rather than transparency because transparency would require the structural accountability that capital manipulation is designed to avoid (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015).

To understand why this gap persists, it is necessary to look beyond individual consumer psychology and examine the cultural frameworks through which sustainability is understood and made meaningful for public discourse. As established earlier in this study, sustainability is neither experienced nor interpreted uniformly across contexts. Cross-cultural evidence makes this divergence particularly evident. In individualistic Western contexts, such as the United Kingdom, sustainability narratives tend to be mediated through personal ethical judgement, individual responsibility, and self-expression. In contrast, within more collectivist contexts such as India, sustainability is more commonly shaped by shared social norms, collective values, and community expectations (Carranza et al., 2023).

Carranza et al.'s (2023) multigroup analysis demonstrates that green enablers such as perceived readiness, informational clarity, and functional communication exert a substantially stronger influence on attitudes towards sustainable luxury among Asian consumers than among their Western counterparts. These factors account for nearly 25 per cent of attitudinal variance in Asian contexts, compared with just 7.6 per cent in Western settings. Carranza et al. (2023) argue that this divergence reflects collectivist cultural orientations, in which environmental responsibility is understood as a shared social obligation rather than an expression of individual values or identity.

Within Western luxury fashion markets, sustainability takes on a further complication. When Western consumers perceive a luxury brand as sustainable, research suggests this perception can paradoxically reduce their sense of personal ethical responsibility, effectively converting the act of purchasing an expensive sustainable product into a substitute for broader environmental action (Carranza et al., 2023; Dabas and Whang, 2022). Sustainability in this formation functions less as environmental commitment and

more as aspirational identity (a commercially available self-image constructed through association with ethically positioned brands). What is purchased matters less than what that purchase is publicly made to mean: a socially legible signal of values, carefully cultivated by brand communication teams to differentiate products within a crowded ethical marketplace (Dabas and Whang, 2022).

It is at this point that sustainability within Western fashion markets begins to resemble what Barthes (1957/1984) describes as a floating signifier: a concept whose meaning is not stable but constantly available for capture by competing commercial interests. This tells that when what consumers recognise as sustainable is determined not by environmental reality but by how meaning is constructed and circulated within the marketplace, brands gain significant latitude to frame and deploy sustainability in ways that serve commercial interests rather than environmental ones. What counts as sustainable becomes, in this condition, less a reflection of what is practised and more an outcome of what is communicated (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024). Scholarly evidence from Indian fashion markets reveals a parallel tension: ethical fashion participation remains overwhelmingly concentrated among high-income urban consumers earning *Rs. 3 million and above annually, whilst the artisanal and craft communities whose zero-waste traditions most materially embody sustainability remain positioned at the economic margins of the very market that claims to champion them (Upadhyay & Kamble, 2025).

The more consequential gap, as this literature suggests, is not between what Western consumers say and what they do; it is between those who profit from sustainability as a brand narrative and those who bear its social and environmental costs. Most structurally invisible within this arrangement are South Asian garment workers, Indian craft artisans, and informal sector textile workers, whose labour underpins the global fashion supply chain but whose contributions are systematically excluded from the sustainability stories that supply chain produces. Whose knowledge is recognised as sustainable, whose labour is valued within global fashion frameworks, and whose communities bear the environmental costs of production are questions that scholars including Khurana (2022), Maheshwari et al. (2025), Patara & Nayak (2025), Huggard and Choudhary (2025), and Lyon and Montgomery (2015) consistently identify as among the most underdeveloped dimensions in the existing literature on sustainable fashion communication.

The dominant body of literature addresses Western markets, Western consumers, and Western certification frameworks (Henninger et al., 2016; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; James and Bardey, 2025; Dabas and Whang, 2022; Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024; Testa et al., 2021). Where South Asian contexts appear, they do so predominantly as case study subjects within frameworks that remain Western in their evaluative assumptions (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Maheshwari et al., 2025; Khurana, 2022; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025; Carranza et al., 2023). Cross-cultural comparative analysis that places Western and South Asian sustainability communication in direct relation, while critically examining the ideological assumptions underpinning both, remains limited. This study seeks to address that gap by examining the fractured and uneven functioning of sustainability discourse both within and between cultures, revealing how cultural values, institutional structures, and relational dynamics shape the interpretation and legitimacy of sustainability narratives across contexts.

3.3 The ideology of western sustainability: eurocentrism, greenwashing, and the limits of solutionism

The divergences identified above do not exist in isolation; they are produced within a broader ideological formation specific to Western sustainability discourse. Scholars argue that sustainability narratives circulating in global fashion and policy contexts are deeply Eurocentric, with Western epistemologies* (Mignolo, 2007; Patara & Nayak, 2025; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025). As Patara and Nayak (2025, p. 81) observe, ‘the very frameworks being used to address the sustainability crisis are the same ones that produced it’. Scholars argue that this dominance was institutionalised through colonialism and continues through neocolonial formations,* of Western market logics long after formal colonial rule has ended (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Mignolo, 2007). Mignolo (2007) conceptualises this persistence as coloniality*. Within Western sustainability specifically, this produces a credentialling system in which what counts as sustainable is defined primarily through certification, institutional disclosure, and technological innovation — categories that map onto Western industrial systems and structurally fail to recognise craft-based production methods, community-rooted ways of making, and intergenerational knowledge* through which sustainability has long been practised in South Asian contexts. Alternative approaches including indigenous and craft-based

production methods, circular material practices rooted in specific cultural contexts, and community-based models of production remain structurally under recognised, not because they are absent from the world but because dominant frameworks were not designed with reference to the knowledge systems they would later fail to recognise (Mignolo, 2007; Patara & Nayak, 2025; Khurana, 2022).

This ideological and epistemic formation materialises in what scholars (Huggard & Choudhary, 2025; Henninger et al., 2016) term fashion solutionism: the tendency within Western sustainability discourse to address environmental crisis through technological fixes, material innovation, and industrial efficiency rather than through structural change in production and labour systems. Within this framework, wages, labour protections, worker health, and resource depletion are not resolved by innovation; they are displaced from the conversation altogether (Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2022; Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020). Fashion solutionism, therefore, does not resolve the sustainability crisis but reframes it within Western sustainability discourse, shifting attention away from the political and economic structures that produce environmental harm towards technical responses that remain entirely compatible with continued economic growth (James and Bardey, 2025; Dabas and Whang, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the structural fragility of Western fashion solutionism. As global supply chains fractured, the gap between the sustainability Western brands publicly communicated and the conditions of production they relied upon became difficult to ignore. Brands that had built public identities around ethical sourcing and supply chain transparency cancelled orders and withheld payments to garment workers in South and Southeast Asia, leaving workers without income or legal recourse (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020). The crisis did not create these conditions; it made their structural depth visible.

Within the United Kingdom specifically, the crisis accelerated a shift towards cruelty-free and vegan fashion among mainstream and luxury consumers alike, driven by public concern around animal-human disease transmission following the confirmed detection of a SARS-CoV-2 variant in farmed mink (Coffin, 2023). Yet the evidence reveals the limits of this shift. Survey data shows that 93% of UK consumers oppose real animal fur and 72% support a nationwide ban, yet fur continues to be both sold and purchased (Coffin, 2023). What the pandemic made visible within Western fashion markets, therefore, is not

a new contradiction but an entrenched one: increased ethical concern does not necessarily translate into sustained behavioural or structural change.

This disjuncture manifested unevenly across Western market segments. Among affluent and luxury consumers, sustainability appeared to be reinforced as a form of identity, something to be signalled through premium ethical consumption rather than structurally enacted (Carranza et al., 2023; Coffin, 2023). In contrast, for consumers unable to access high-cost ethical alternatives, minimalism* emerged as a more accessible framework, centred on reducing consumption, maintaining existing garments, and making more intentional purchasing decisions (Martin-Woodhead, 2021). While minimalism aligns superficially with principles of reduction and reuse, it remains limited in its capacity to challenge systemic production models within Western fashion (Martin-Woodhead, 2021). Fashion mass production continued largely uninterrupted, contributing approximately 10% of global carbon emissions, exceeding those of the shipping and aviation sectors combined (Bildirici et al., 2025; United Nations Environment Programme, 2019). In this sense, minimalism might be understood as solutionism at the level of the individual wardrobe, reshaping consumer behaviour without fundamentally altering the Western production structures that generate unsustainability.

As sustainability narratives became increasingly profitable within Western fashion markets, the imperative to appear more ‘sustainable’ began to outweigh the basic commitment to enact it. Within this context, greenwashing* emerges as Western solutionism's most refined expression (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). Western sustainability discourse is now so thoroughly embedded within fashion branding that it operates as a malleable marketing tool, invoked selectively and strategically by brands without a fixed or verifiable ethical commitment. In this sense, sustainability has evolved into what Henninger et al. (2016) describe as a ‘commercial megatrend*’ within Western fashion markets, whose meaning is increasingly diluted through overuse and strategic deployment.

Scholars working within this Western fashion context have mapped the specific forms greenwashing takes. Lyon and Montgomery (2015) outline three dominant practices: selective disclosure: where brands release only favourable environmental information; cheap talk: where sustainability claims are made without verifiable evidence; and symbolic management: where surface-level gestures such as a green logo, a recycled hangtag, or a sustainability pledge create the appearance of change without altering

underlying practices. More recently, Alizadeh and Liscio (2024) have refined this framework specifically within Western fashion brand communication, identifying five patterns: misleading claims, concealment of negative information, vagueness, overstating minor improvements, and irrelevance. Together, these practices do not merely obscure accurate information; they actively organise what can and cannot be seen within a brand's sustainability communication, shaping through selective framing both what consumers are invited to consider and what they are not, reflecting a broader tendency within Western sustainability frameworks to foreground marketable environmental claims while marginalising the labour conditions underpinning production.

The Western sustainability literature illustrates these grey areas most concretely through the case of Stella McCartney. Widely positioned as a pioneer of sustainable luxury within Western markets, the brand has built its public identity around a commitment to vegan and cruelty-free fashion: a sector projected to exceed £1.1 trillion globally by 2028 (Coffin, 2023). As a signatory of the UNFCCC Fashion Charter for Climate Action and a member of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation Global Commitment in partnership with the UN Environment Programme, the brand has built substantial institutional sustainability credentials within Western policy frameworks (Stella McCartney, 2023). Yet as Testa et al. (2021) demonstrate across sustainable fashion brand communication on Instagram, explicitly ethical content consistently underperforms compared with celebrity-driven and aspirational lifestyle content (Kolotouchkina et al., 2025), suggesting that sustainability, for Western luxury audiences, may function less as substantive environmental commitment than as a marker of status and identity operating through aspirational consumption (Dabas and Whang, 2022).

What Eurocentrism, greenwashing, and fashion solutionism share, and what this section has traced across the literature, is a common structural logic: each operates by determining what counts as sustainable, who has the authority to make that determination, and whose practices remain outside the boundaries of recognition (Mignolo, 2007; Patara & Nayak, 2025).

3.4 The Indian craft-based sustainability: erased histories, living knowledge and market marginalisation

Understanding sustainable fashion in India requires engaging with histories that significantly predate contemporary sustainability discourse. Prior to British colonisation, India accounted for approximately 22.5% of global GDP, sustained by highly developed textile systems in which sustainability was not framed as an ethical choice but existed as an embedded condition of production (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Khurana, 2022). These were not primitive industries awaiting modernisation, but sophisticated, ecologically integrated systems organised around durability, reuse, and social reproduction.

Colonial rule systematically dismantled these systems. Scholars document that the 1813 Charter Act flooded Indian markets with British-manufactured textiles whilst restricting Indian exports, restructuring India from a producer of finished goods into a supplier of raw materials (Huggard & Choudhary, 2025). The economic consequences were profoundly unequal: between 1757 and 1947, British incomes rose by 347% while Indian incomes increased by only 14% (Gupta, 2019).

What colonialism displaced was not only an economic base but a living system of practical knowledge: the accumulated understanding, held within craft communities and passed down across generations, of how to make, repair, and circulate materials in ways that minimised waste as a condition of production rather than as an ethical addition. This study documents these traditions directly: kantha* embroidery in West Bengal transforms worn cotton saris into new textiles; sujani* embroidery in Bihar repurposes discarded fabrics into richly textured surfaces; kowdhi* quilting reworks remnants into functional and culturally valued objects (Huggard & Choudhary, 2025). These are not decorative practices; they are examples of production systems in which the reuse and transformation of materials was integral to both economic life and the ways communities understood their relationship to their environment and to each other. Colonial systems systematically delegitimised such practices, recasting them as backward or inefficient in order to displace them in favour of industrial production models oriented toward scale, standardisation, and profit extraction. The loss of these practices, scholars argue, was not simply material displacement; it was the systematic dismantling of the practical and cultural knowledge through which communities had sustained themselves within ecological limits for

generations, knowledge that, once displaced, cannot be straightforwardly recovered (Khurana, 2022; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025; Schumacher, 1973).

It was not, as Schumacher (1973) argued, the inevitable result of economic progress but the consequence of specific choices about which kinds of production were worth sustaining and which were not, choices that reflected the priorities of industrial capital rather than the accumulated wisdom of the communities whose livelihoods those choices dismantled (Patara & Nayak, 2025). This structural logic extends well beyond India. E.F. Schumacher, in *Small Is Beautiful* (1973), argued that Western industrial economies dismantled localised, human-scale production systems organised around dignity, craft, and ecological limits, not because they were inefficient, but because they could not generate the scale of growth required by capital. This pattern, as Mignolo (2007) documents, repeated itself across South and Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, where colonial economic restructuring similarly displaced community-rooted and ecologically embedded production systems in favour of industrialised models oriented toward Western market demands.

Whilst Section 3.3 examined how Western brands responded to the pandemic COVID-19 at the level of communication, the structural consequences for South Asian producers reveal a different and more materially consequential dimension of the same crisis. As global supply chains fractured between 2020 and 2021, Western fashion brands that utilised Indian labour markets cancelled orders and delayed payments, leaving garment workers across Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, and other major manufacturing regions without income or legal recourse, with workers across South and Southeast Asia receiving on average 38% less than their regular income and total wages lost globally estimated at between 3.19 and 5.79 billion USD (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020). Paradoxically, this occurred precisely as global attention to sustainable fashion was intensifying: the pandemic accelerated consumer interest, particularly in Western markets, in ethical purchasing and brands responded by amplifying their sustainability communication, even as the labour conditions underpinning their supply chains deteriorated visibly. Yet India's traditional zero-waste craft practices, which most materially embodied the sustainability values, received no financial recognition, policy support, or market infrastructure within the global fashion system during this period, remaining economically peripheral within a market that continued to position the country primarily as a site of low-cost production (Ranjan et al., 2025; Sandhu, 2020). The crisis did not create these conditions; it made

visible the structural asymmetry that had long organised the relationship between Western fashion brands, who control pricing, ordering, and cancellation, and South Asian producers, who bear the financial risk without equivalent contractual protection.

This asymmetry, moreover, was not unprecedented. The 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh, which killed 1,134 garment workers producing for major Western brands, had already exposed the human cost embedded within global fashion supply chains (Domínguez and Diaz Soloaga, 2025). Yet little structural change followed. And informal sector textile workers remain economically vulnerable and systematically undervalued within the same global supply chains that profit from their output.

This marginalisation extends beyond cultural representation into material conditions. International initiatives such as the Ethical Fashion Initiative, established under the UN International Trade Centre, have sought to address this gap by spotlighting artisans from developing countries within sustainable fashion frameworks (United Nations Environment Programme, 2019). However, the problem, as this literature collectively suggests, has never been the absence of sustainable production alternatives in these contexts; it has been the systemic refusal of Western industrial trade policy, international certification systems (e.g. Global Organic Textile Standard, 2023; Fashion Revolution, 2024), and academic sustainability scholarship to recognise craft-based, community-rooted, and ecologically embedded practices as legitimate forms of sustainable production (Schumacher, 1973; Mignolo, 2007; Patara & Nayak, 2025; Khurana, 2022).

Evidence shows that Indian garment workers are paid significantly below the Asia Floor Wage*, a benchmark established by labour rights organisations to define the minimum income necessary for a garment worker in Asia to live with basic dignity, reflecting entrenched power asymmetries in global supply chains where Western brands dictate pricing while displacing cost pressures onto the most economically vulnerable workers (Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2022; Khurana, 2022; Maheshwari et al., 2025). Environmental harm follows the same structural pattern: toxic discharge and chemical pollution are disproportionately concentrated in Indian manufacturing regions, where local communities bear the environmental consequences of an industry whose profits flow elsewhere (Bildirici et al., 2025). Labour exploitation and environmental degradation, the literature makes clear, are not irrelevant to sustainability in the Indian context; they are its most defining and urgent dimensions, and their systematic absence from Western sustainability communication frameworks is itself an illustration of the convenient

recognition dynamic (Khurana, 2022; Patara & Nayak, 2025; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015).

FabIndia presents a particularly instructive illustration of these tensions, and one that a growing body of scholarship has begun to address (Kumar and Gupta, 2019; Maheshwari et al., 2025; Khurana, 2022). Scholars document that the company was founded in 1960 by John Bissell with an explicit mission to connect rural Indian artisans to urban and international markets, aligning craft production with post-Independence development ideals of economic self-sufficiency and community investment (Kumar and Gupta, 2019). Its contemporary model, often described as inclusive capitalism, incorporates over 55,000 rural producers as minority stakeholders, making it one of the largest artisan-linked commercial enterprises in India (Kumar and Gupta, 2019; Maheshwari et al., 2025).

Yet this inclusion remains structurally uneven, and what follows is not a dismissal of FabIndia's model but an examination of the tensions within it, consistent with this study's position that both performed and ambient sustainability carry their own limitations and vulnerabilities to commercial capture. Artisans hold approximately 26% equity in FabIndia's artisan-supplier model, meaning they receive a minority share of the commercial value generated from their knowledge and labour, while the company retains 49%, maintaining structural control over how that knowledge is commercialised and at what price (Maheshwari et al., 2025). This asymmetry extends into the company's institutional framing. Fabindia Limited's (2025) CSR report explicitly categorises craft support as the "conservation of national heritage, art, culture and other related activities". This study argues that such a framing strategically re-positions artisan knowledge as static cultural heritage to be curated by the institution, effectively obscuring it as productive labour requiring equitable compensation. This distinction may carry material consequences: when craft is framed as heritage, the institution positions itself as its guardian, which is a relationship of power rather than partnership; when craft is framed as productive labour, the relationship becomes one of economic accountability and fair remuneration (Maheshwari et al., 2025; Patara & Nayak, 2025). As Appadurai (1986) argues, the value of objects and practices is not inherent but shaped by the social and economic conditions under which they are exchanged; in FabIndia's artisan-supplier model, those conditions of exchange are structured by the company's commercial interests rather than determined by the artisans whose knowledge generates the value being exchanged.

Whether and how artisan knowledge might be recognised on terms other than those set by commercial exchange, and what structural conditions would need to change to make that possible, are questions this study raises through its empirical analysis but cannot fully resolve within its scope.

3.5 Conclusion to the Literature Review

What emerges from this body of literature is that Western luxury sustainability and Indian craft-based sustainability reflect fundamentally different frameworks of value: one organised through certification, quantified disclosure, and market-facing symbolic communication; the other through intergenerational transmission of craft knowledge, community-rooted production, and cultural continuity. These two frameworks are not simply different communication styles. They rest on different assumptions about what sustainability is, where it originates, and who its primary beneficiary should be. When the former is used to evaluate the latter, the result is not cross-cultural comparison but the application of a measuring instrument to something it was not designed to measure.

This asymmetry suggests that sustainability functions less as a consistent environmental standard and more as a discursive resource* mobilised and commodified within commercial and institutional systems without necessarily altering the underlying conditions of production those systems rely upon (Barthes, 1957/1984; Henninger et al., 2016). The persistent disjuncture between narrative and practice is not, this literature suggests, simply a failure of institutional will. It is a condition structured by the power asymmetries that determine whose sustainability gets defined, measured, and rewarded.

At this point, the literature begins to reveal what it has not yet fully addressed. The craft practices and knowledge systems that most materially embody sustainability, particularly those rooted in Indian craft traditions, are not absent from the global fashion system. They are systematically under recognised within it. Drawing on Spivak's (1988) essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', the artisans and craft practitioners who most concretely embody sustainable fashion knowledge can be understood as occupying a subaltern* position within the global fashion system: present in production, structurally marginalised within both the scholarly literature and the commercial frameworks that determine whose sustainability is valued, certified, and rewarded. The distinction between these two forms

of recognition matters and this study addresses both explicitly. Within academic literature, South Asian craft sustainability has received comparatively limited attention relative to Western sustainability models (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Khurana, 2022). Within global fashion industry frameworks, including certification bodies, sustainability indices, and international trade associations, the recognition gap is even more pronounced: Indian craft knowledge systems do not register within the categories these frameworks use to define and reward sustainability. Their knowledge and practices do not need to be invented. They need to be recognised on their own terms, as a fully legitimate model of sustainable production that is environmental, economic, and social in its nature, rather than translated into the language of Western certification and institutional validation before they can be seen (Mignolo, 2007; Spivak, 1988).

This under recognition arguably extends into a more direct form of recolonisation. Rodriguez Schon and Valle-Noronha (2025) argue, in the context of fashion archives, that when marginalised knowledge systems are only permitted to enter dominant institutional discourse once translated into that framework's own evaluative categories, the effect is not genuine inclusion but a redefinition of that knowledge on terms it did not set for itself: material practices persist, but their meaning is re-authored elsewhere. Extending this logic to Indian craft, the risk is not only that its sustainability contribution goes unseen, but that even when it is eventually recognised, that recognition happens only on the dominant framework's terms: craft knowledge reframed and certified in the vocabulary of Western sustainability metrics, stripped of the cultural and cosmological logic in which it is actually embedded. Recognition, in this sense, would not remedy the erasure identified above but repeat it in a subtler form, since it is recolonisation, rather than exclusion, that becomes the mechanism through which the dominant framework retains interpretive authority.

The question, then, is not whether sustainable fashion exists beyond Western luxury frameworks, but whether existing systems of valuation are capable of recognising it on its own terms.

By placing Western luxury and Indian craft traditions in direct analytical relation, this study approaches sustainability not as a universal standard but as a discourse that is produced relationally shaped by the interaction between unequal systems of power, knowledge, and institutional recognition rather than existing independently of them (Mignolo, 2007; Patara & Nayak, 2025). In doing so, this study shifts the analytical focus

from defining sustainability as a fixed environmental standard toward examining the power relations that determine whose sustainability is rendered visible, whose is structurally excluded, and what the consequences of that exclusion are for both scholarship and practice.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Research Approach

This research adopts a qualitative approach grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism holds that social reality is not a fixed objective truth but is actively constructed through human experience, language, and cultural meaning and therefore must be interpreted rather than measured (Crotty, 1998). As Braun and Clarke (2022) establish, qualitative research is focused on meaning, on understanding situated and contextualised knowledge rather than producing singular, measurable truths. This orientation suits the present study directly: the aim is not to quantify sustainable fashion but to interrogate how it is constructed, communicated, and ideologically framed across two different cultural contexts; Indian craft-based sustainability as expressed by FabIndia, and Western luxury sustainability as expressed by Stella McCartney.

Within this paradigm, the research takes a critical orientation, meaning it also interrogates what that communication does ideologically: whose interests it serves, what it makes visible, and what it structurally conceals (Hall, 1997). Rather than exploring how individuals experience sustainable fashion, this study treats Instagram posts as ideological constructions, examining the power relations embedded within brand narratives across two culturally distinct contexts. This is what Braun and Clarke (2022) describe as "hermeneutics of suspicion" (pg.160), interrogating meanings rather than taking them at face value; an orientation particularly appropriate for a cross-cultural study examining how Eurocentric frameworks have shaped and continue to dominate global sustainability discourse (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025).

The epistemological position of this study is constructionist, specifically in its contextualist form. Braun and Clarke (2022) establish constructionism as the view that meaning is created through language and images rather than simply reflected by them: what a brand communicates about sustainability does not transparently reveal what it practises, but actively constructs a version of sustainability for a particular audience. Contextualism, as its situated form, holds that knowledge is always partial, shaped by perspective, and produced within a specific cultural context rather than from a neutral or universal standpoint (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Both positions apply directly to this study:

every analytical observation rests on treating Instagram posts not as transparent windows onto brand practice but as ideological constructions, that is, as deliberate communicative choices that foreground certain meanings and conceal others. This approach is consistent with the literature's established position that meaning-making around sustainable fashion is not culturally neutral but shaped by the power relations within which it is produced (Henninger et al., 2016; Hall, 1997; Mignolo, 2007). Ontologically, the study is grounded in critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975), which holds that sustainability exists as a real phenomenon with real material consequences in the world, independent of how it is communicated, but that our knowledge of it is always culturally produced, partially accessed, and shaped by the social and cultural standpoint of the researcher. This ontological position directly informs the reflexive stance this study adopts: it does not claim to offer a view from nowhere, but acknowledges that its analytical observations are shaped by the researcher's own cultural positioning and are therefore subject to the same critical scrutiny the study applies to its data.

The analysis operates at both semantic and latent levels simultaneously, as Braun and Clarke (2022) identify: semantic coding captures the explicit content of posts, named craft techniques, quantified material claims, and specific sustainability language, whilst latent coding moves beneath the surface to interrogate the ideological work those explicit elements perform.

4.2 Research Strategy

This research is underpinned by two complementary frameworks: Denscombe's (2014) comparative case study methodology provides the overarching research architecture, and Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis* provides the analytical method.

Denscombe (2014) establishes the logic of the research design through what he terms extreme instance logic: the deliberate selection of cases where a specified factor is seen in sharp relief, making its ideological influence most clearly visible. FabIndia and Stella McCartney are selected precisely on this basis, as polar instances of craft-based collective sustainability rooted in Indian cultural heritage, and Western luxury sustainability framed through individual consumer ethics and material innovation.

The contrast between them is analytically productive. Denscombe (2014) further establishes that although each case is unique, findings carry transferability rather than statistical generalisability, an important distinction for qualitative research of this kind.

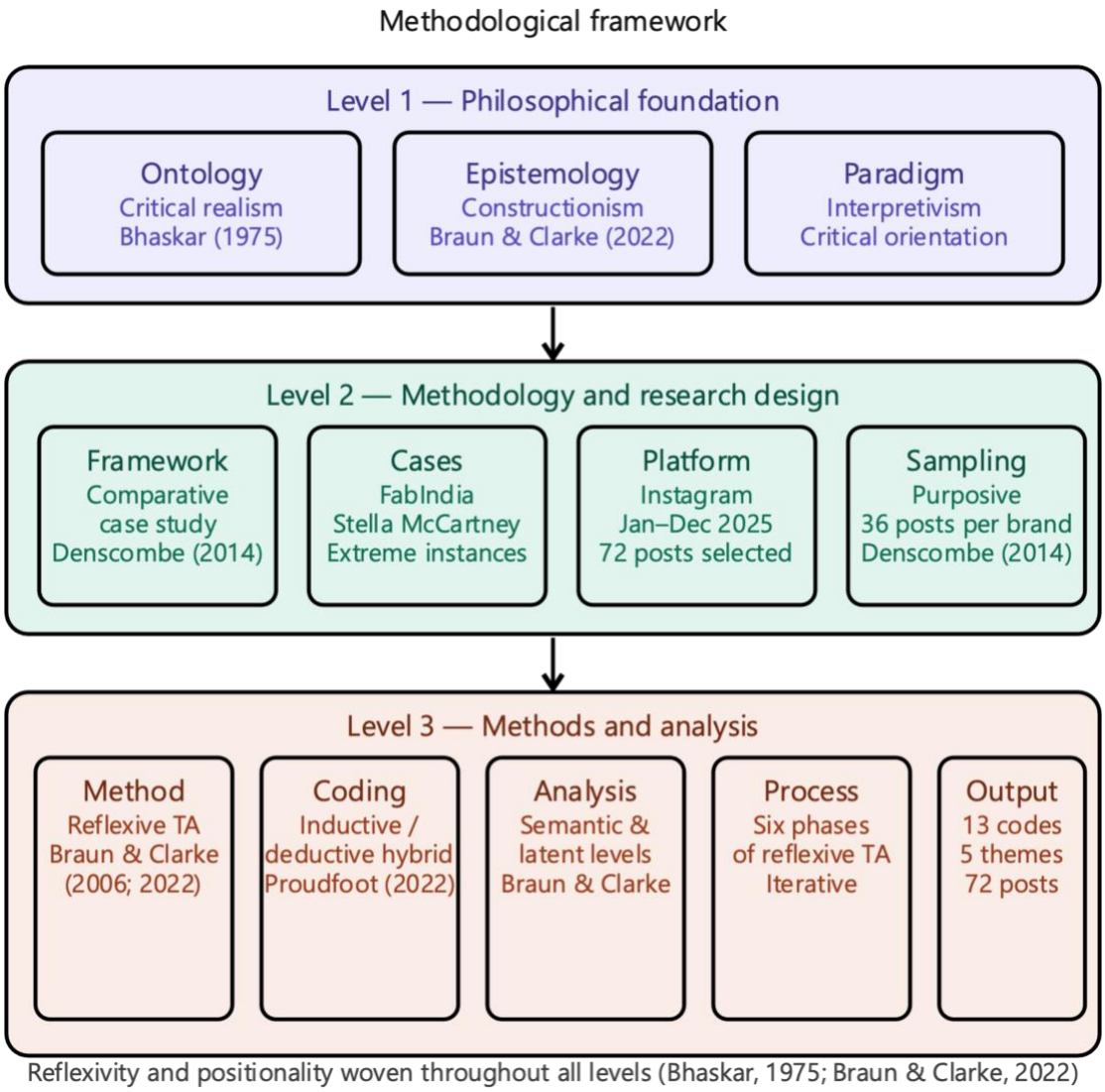
Braun and Clarke (2022) provide the analytical tools for this study. Reflexive thematic analysis is a method valued across qualitative research for its flexibility across paradigms and its capacity for interpretive rather than merely descriptive work, qualities that have made it widely adopted in critically oriented qualitative research across the social sciences (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Clarke & Braun, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017; Terry et al., 2017).

The researcher's coding process employed what Proudfoot (2022) terms an inductive and deductive hybrid approach, in which theory-derived and data-emergent codes operate simultaneously rather than sequentially. The initial codebook was theory-informed, drawn directly from the literature review and research questions.

It incorporated Barthes' (1984) framework of myth and ideology as a tool for identifying latent meaning in brand imagery; Entman's (1993) framing theory as a framework for analysing selective visibility within brand communication; and postcolonial perspectives from Mignolo (2007) and Spivak (1988) for examining whose sustainability knowledge is recognised and whose is structurally excluded. Additional codes emerged inductively through repeated engagement with the data, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive approach in which the codebook is treated as a working document rather than a fixed instrument.

Denscombe's (2014) comparative case study framework confirms that the researcher's use of purposive case selection and Instagram as a data source is methodologically appropriate for a cross-cultural qualitative study of this kind, given that both brands are publicly accessible, analytically bounded, and selected on the basis of their capacity to illuminate the research questions rather than for statistical representativeness.

Figure 1. Data Collection Framework. Created by the author, drawing on Bhaskar (1975) and Braun and Clarke (2022).



4.3 Reflexivity and positionality

Reflexivity, as Braun and Clarke (2022) establish, is not a one-off declaration of neutrality but an ongoing process of critical self-examination: a continuous engagement with the ways in which the researcher's identity, values, and cultural position shape every stage of the research, from the formulation of research questions to the interpretation of data. The knowledge produced in this research is shaped by who I am, where I stand, and what I can and cannot see from that position. This section offers that declaration as a starting point, while acknowledging that its full enactment is woven throughout the analytical process.

I am an Indian researcher examining two brands whose sustainability models reflect the two cultural contexts I simultaneously inhabit and observe:, one as an insider, one as an outsider. As an Indian, I bring cultural proximity to FabIndia's craft heritage, its regional festival calendar, its bilingual caption strategies, and the postcolonial dimensions of the research. Simultaneously, I am an outsider to Stella McCartney's Western luxury sustainability positioning. This outsider position generates a productive critical distance; it allows me to interrogate the ideological assumptions embedded in Western luxury sustainability discourse without taking them as given, and to identify what that discourse renders invisible as well as what it makes visible.

This dual positioning is not a limitation but a methodological resource (Denscombe, 2014, p. 330). It is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2022) position that researcher subjectivity actively shapes rather than contaminates analysis. It is also consistent with Denscombe's (2014, p. 329) quality criterion of confirmability, which recognises that qualitative data are always interpreted through the researcher and that no enquiry is free from their influence. Bhaskar's (1975) later theorisation of reflexivity as a form of self-transcendence is particularly relevant here. By self-transcendence, Bhaskar means the researcher's recognition that they are themselves constituted by the same cultural and historical forces, they seek to examine that the analyst is never outside the system they analyse. For this study, that recognition takes a specific form: I bring cultural proximity to the Indian craft context, meaning an understanding developed from within that cultural world, while simultaneously maintaining the critical analytical distance that the research questions demand. It is that combination, rather than a claim to neutrality, that this study treats as its reflexive resource.

One reflexive tension warrants explicit acknowledgement. My cultural proximity to FabIndia carries the risk of uncritical appreciation, of reading the brand's craft heritage narrative as inherently authentic without subjecting it to the same hermeneutics of suspicion (Braun & Clarke, 2022) applied to Stella McCartney's sustainability claims.

This risk has been actively managed throughout the analytical process: the same coding framework was applied to both brands without modification, disconfirming evidence within FabIndia's posts was actively sought rather than overlooked (Denscombe, 2014, p. 330), repeated returns to the raw data were prioritised over initial interpretations, and a reflexive journal was maintained throughout to document evolving analytical decisions and interrogate emerging assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As the findings demonstrate, FabIndia's sustainability communication is not exempt from my critical scrutiny; the silence behind its natural fibre claims, the selective visibility of its artisan communities, and the ambient rather than accountable nature of its sustainability register are all interrogated as carefully as Stella McCartney's crisis-to-product pipeline and rotating sustainability frames. It is also worth noting here that ambient sustainability is not necessarily more genuine than performed sustainability; it may simply be harder to contest, which is itself an ideological asymmetry. Both brands remain commercial enterprises operating within market logics, and both are treated accordingly throughout this analysis.

4.4 Ethical considerations

As the data consists exclusively of corporate communications on public-facing brand accounts, the study does not raise the primary ethical concerns associated with research involving human participants; informed consent, anonymity, and participant welfare do not apply. Both @fabindiaofficial and @stellamccartney are verified brand accounts publishing content with the explicit intention of reaching broad consumer audiences; there is no reasonable expectation of privacy attached to this material, consistent with established practice in social media research (Denscombe, 2014). Where comment section data is referenced, individual usernames are included only where a comment constitutes a substantive analytical data point, treated as public speech acts rather than private communications, consistent with their publicly visible status on the platform.

Chapter 5: Research Design and Methods

5.1 Overview

This research examines how FabIndia (India) and Stella McCartney (United Kingdom) construct and communicate sustainability through Instagram content published between January and December 2025. FabIndia supports over 55,000 rural artisans (Kumar & Gupta, 2019), embodying craft-based community sustainability at scale. Stella McCartney builds its sustainability identity around material innovation, animal welfare advocacy, and aspirational ethical consumer identity.

Instagram is selected as the data source for three reasons. Whilst existing scholarship has begun to examine how fashion brands deploy Instagram as a site of sustainability communication, with Kolotouchkina et al. (2025) identifying both opportunities and persistent challenges in environmental activism among B-Corp certified brands, such studies remain largely confined to Western brand contexts and do not engage with cross-cultural comparative analysis; a gap this study directly addresses. First, it is the primary platform through which both brands construct and disseminate their sustainability identities to consumer audiences. Second, as Braun and Clarke (2022) explicitly acknowledge, social media posts are amenable to reflexive thematic analysis, making Instagram content a legitimate and well-suited data source for this method. Third, Instagram's dual structure, visual image alongside written caption, makes it uniquely appropriate for a study examining both the ideological content of sustainability narratives and the cultural codes through which they are communicated. Each post yields two simultaneous data streams: the visual, carrying aesthetic and symbolic meaning, and the textual, carrying explicit narrative and linguistic framing. Denscombe (2014) establishes both as legitimate qualitative data sources, noting that images function as cultural artefacts whose meaning lies not merely in their surface content but in the cultural ideology underpinning their production.

The data collection period of January to December 2025 is selected to capture a full annual cycle of brand communication. Both brands structure their content around seasonal and cultural calendars, FabIndia across India's regional festival calendar, Stella McCartney

across the Western fashion show calendar and global environmental awareness days. A full year ensures that neither brand's sustainability communication is assessed through a partial or seasonally unrepresentative window, and allows patterns of consistency, variation, and strategic repetition to be identified across time.

5.2 Sampling

Following Denscombe (2014), a purposive sampling strategy was adopted. Posts were deliberately selected on the basis of known attributes relevant to the research questions rather than through random sampling. The aim was not statistical representativeness but analytical breadth, ensuring that the sample captured the full range of sustainability communication strategies deployed by each brand across the data collection period.

Before detailing the sampling procedure, it is useful to briefly situate the two brands examined in this study, given the differences in scale, ownership, and market position between them. FabIndia is a private, community-oriented Indian retailer founded in 1960, sourcing from a network of tens of thousands of rural artisans and reporting group revenue in the range of roughly ₹1,000–1,700 crore (approximately US$120–200 million) in recent financial years (Fabindia Limited, 2025; Tracxn, 2026). It operates several hundred stores across India and a smaller number of international outlets, targets a broad, price-accessible domestic market, and is governed by a private board of directors with minority institutional investment from Premji Invest; its official Instagram account has an estimated following in the hundreds of thousands. Stella McCartney, by contrast, is a British luxury fashion house founded in 2001, positioned in the premium segment with reported annual sales in the tens of millions of pounds (Fortune, 2025). Since January 2025 the brand has been wholly owned and governed by its founder-designer, having bought back LVMH's minority stake after previous periods of co-ownership with Gucci Group and then LVMH; its Instagram account has approximately seven million followers (HypeAuditor, 2026). These asymmetries in scale, ownership structure, and market positioning are relevant to interpreting the differences in sustainability communication identified in Chapter 6.

From a total dataset of 604 posts published across 2025 (FabIndia: 236, Stella McCartney: 368), 72 posts were selected for analysis, 36 per brand, representing approximately 12% of available content. Selection criteria were developed in two stages. First, an initial

scoping review of both brand accounts was conducted across the full 2025 dataset prior to formal data collection. This scoping review identified the dominant communicative pattern of each brand: FabIndia published content that was sustained, culturally embedded, and thematically varied, with no single post type dominating the account; Stella McCartney published content that was campaign-driven, with high-reach posts concentrated around celebrity appearances, product launches, and explicit sustainability claims. Second, selection criteria were tailored to each brand's identified communicative logic in order to capture its full analytical range. For FabIndia, a diversity-led criterion was applied, prioritising thematic breadth across the brand's content range: craft heritage, artisan narratives, festival culture, slow fashion, and textile storytelling. This criterion was adopted because FabIndia's ambient sustainability register is distributed across content categories rather than concentrated in any single type, and a diversity-led approach was therefore necessary to capture its full analytical range. For Stella McCartney, an impact-led criterion was applied, prioritising posts with explicit sustainability claims, discernible tension between claim and content, and notable celebrity engagement. This criterion was adopted because Stella McCartney's performed sustainability register is most analytically concentrated in its highest-reach content, and an impact-led approach was therefore necessary to capture the posts carrying the most significant evidence of the communicative strategies this study examines. These two selection logics were not applied as rigid rules but as reflexive frameworks guiding analytical judgement at each selection point, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2022) position that sampling decisions in reflexive thematic analysis are inseparable from the researcher's developing analytical understanding of the data.

Within each monthly selection, spanning January to December 2025 for both brands, posts were chosen on the basis of the variation described in the preceding paragraph, across three dimensions: post format, content focus, and thematic range. Selection was operationalised through a structured analytical instrument developed in Microsoft Excel prior to data collection, comprising columns for post format, visual description, sustainability keywords, theme, research question links, and analytical notes ensuring posts were chosen systematically and transparently rather than impressionistically. It is acknowledged that purposive sampling involves researcher judgement in post selection; following Braun and Clarke (2022), this judgement is understood not as bias to be

controlled but as a reflexive and theoretically informed act, made transparent here and engaged with further in the Reflexivity and Positionality section.

5.3 Data Collection

Data was collected through direct manual documentation of the official Instagram accounts of FabIndia (@fabindiaofficial) and Stella McCartney (@stellamccartney), accessed via web browser at instagram.com. Both accounts are publicly accessible brand-managed profiles: no login, scraping tool, or third-party data extraction software was used. Each selected post was accessed directly through the platform and documented in full, including screenshots of the visual content, manual transcription of captions, written description of visual elements, and recording of engagement metrics including likes and comments counts. For each post, the following data points were recorded: publication date, post format (image, reel, or carousel), full caption text including hashtags, a detailed visual description across all slides or frames, sustainability-related keywords and themes identified in the caption and visual content, and engagement metrics including like and comment counts recorded at the time of access. These data points were selected in direct response to the two selection criteria established in the sampling stage. For posts selected under the diversity-led criterion (primarily FabIndia), detailed visual description and thematic identification were prioritised, reflecting the need to capture the range of cultural, craft, and community meanings embedded across content categories that do not always make explicit sustainability claims in their captions. For posts selected under the impact-led criterion (primarily Stella McCartney), comment content was additionally recorded where comments directly engaged with sustainability claims, reflecting the need to capture evidence of how audiences responded to explicit sustainability communication in high-reach posts. Together, these data points were designed to provide the full range of textual, visual, and contextual material needed to conduct a reflexive thematic analysis responsive to both research questions: one examining how sustainability is defined and expressed across cultural contexts, and one examining the cultural ideologies underpinning those expressions. Each post is treated as a whole communicative act, its visual and textual dimensions analysed simultaneously rather than in isolation. Engagement data, in the form of 'like counts', is not treated as a straightforward measure of communication effectiveness. Rather, following Testa et al. (2021), it is used

analytically to examine the relationship between sustainability content and audience response; a relationship that, as the data reveals, is neither linear nor predictable, and which itself constitutes a finding relevant to both research questions.

5.4 Analytical Framework : Reflexive Thematic Analysis

As outlined in Chapter 3, this study employs Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2022) reflexive thematic analysis, selected for its suitability in identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets. This approach aligns with the research aims of examining how sustainable fashion is constructed across cultural contexts and exploring the ideological underpinnings of these constructions.

The analysis was conducted at both semantic and latent levels (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining deductive and inductive coding approaches (Proudfoot, 2022). Initial codes were informed by the research questions and literature, while additional codes were generated through iterative engagement with the data. Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) framework, the analysis was iterative rather than strictly linear, allowing for refinement of codes and themes throughout the process.

The six phases of analysis were operationalised as follows:

Phase 1: Familiarisation

Before any coding began, the full dataset of 72 posts across both brands was read in its entirety. Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) first phase, familiarisation involves more than reading; it requires deep, repeated engagement with the data until patterns, textures, and tensions begin to surface. For each post the full caption was read, the visual content examined across all slides (individual images within a carousel post) or frames (individual shots/scenes within a reel video), engagement data noted, and initial analytical observations recorded. This process was carried out across both brands simultaneously rather than sequentially, so that cross-brand contrasts were present in the analysis from the earliest stage of engagement with the data.

Phase 2: Coding

Following Phase 1, a codebook was developed organised around the central question: what is this post doing ideologically? This orienting question kept the coding interpretive

rather than descriptive from the outset. The coding process combined deductive and inductive orientations simultaneously, following what Proudfoot (2022, p. 308) describes as a hybrid approach in which theory-derived and data-emergent codes "mutually enhance one another. The initial codebook was theory-informed, drawn from the literature review and research questions, whilst additional codes surfaced organically through repeated engagement with the data.

Table 1: Distribution of deductive and inductive codes within the codebook

Orientation	Code ID	Code Name	Source
Deductive	C-07	Eco-material innovation	Literature
Deductive	C-08	Green luxury aspiration	Literature
Deductive	C-09	Vegan / cruelty-free	Literature
Deductive	C-10	CSR narrative	Literature
Deductive	C-11	Greenwashing signals	Literature
Deductive	C-13	Fashion solutionism	Literature
Inductive	C-01	Slow wardrobe narrative	Data-emergent
Inductive	C-02	Craft signalling	Data-emergent
Inductive	C-03	Product education	Data-emergent
Inductive	C-04	Lifestyle aspiration	Data-emergent
Inductive	C-05	Artisan empowerment	Data-emergent
Inductive	C-06	Heritage & craft revival	Data-emergent
Inductive	C-12	Community / collective responsibility	Data-emergent

The emergence of seven inductive codes, particularly within FabIndia's dataset, highlights the importance of allowing coding frameworks to remain responsive to the data. This aligns with the epistemological position outlined in Chapter 3, which

emphasises the limitations of applying exclusively Western theoretical frameworks to culturally embedded sustainability practices.

The deductive codes were primarily informed by Entman's (1993) framing theory, which provided the theoretical lens through which sustainability communication was interrogated across both brands. Entman (1993) identifies four functions through which communicative frames (understood as selective structures of meaning that shape how issues are perceived and interpreted), operate within media and communication research: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgements, and suggesting remedies; functions that, as this study demonstrates, are systematically deployed across both brands' Instagram narratives.

Table 2: Application of Entman's framing functions across the dataset

Framing	Definition	Codes	How it operates in the dataset
Defining problems	Identifies what the sustainability issue is	C-11, C-13	Environmental crisis statistics frame the problem: animal deaths, ocean pollution, microplastics
Diagnosing causes	Attributes responsibility for the problem	C-07, C-09	Conventional materials and animal products are positioned as the cause requiring remedy
Making moral judgements	Implies ethical positioning	C-08, C-09	Ethical consumption is framed as personal distinction and aspirational identity
Suggesting remedies	Offers or withholds a solution	C-07, C-13	Technology and material innovation are positioned as the definitive solution

note: *Codes may perform multiple framing functions simultaneously (Entman, 1993)*

Within sustainability communication more broadly, this selective visibility is not incidental but fundamental, it is precisely through what is left out of the frame that greenwashing becomes possible. These four functions informed the interpretive logic of the codebook. Each post was analysed not only for its explicit content, but also for how it defined sustainability problems, attributed causes, implied moral positions, and offered or withheld remedies.

The codebook evolved through repeated engagement with the data. Thirteen codes were ultimately identified and applied across the 72-post dataset. Multiple codes were applied

to individual posts where content performed more than one ideological function whilst most codes operated within a single theme, four codes crossed theme boundaries, performing different analytical functions depending on the register at which they were examined.

Table 3: Relationship between themes, codes, and analytical questions

Theme	Codes	Code Names	Analytical Register	Guiding Question
Cultural Responsibility	C-05, C-12	Artisan empowerment; Community responsibility	Semantic	What does sustainability look like in practice?
Artisan & Community Visibility	C-05, C-12	Artisan empowerment; Community responsibility	Latent	Whose labour is recognised, and in whose interests?
Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability	C-07, C-13	Eco-material innovation; Fashion solutionism	Semantic	What does innovation say about the brand?
Fashion Solutionism vs Craft Wisdom	C-07, C-13	Eco-material innovation; Fashion solutionism	Latent	What assumptions about the world does innovation reflect?

Phase 3: Generating initial themes

Following the completion of coding across all 72 posts, the analysis moved to Braun and Clarke's (2022) third phase: generating initial themes by examining the relationships between codes and identifying broader patterns of meaning. Themes in reflexive thematic analysis are not containers for codes; they are analytic outputs, actively constructed by the researcher through a process of interpretation rather than treated as pre-existing patterns waiting to be found within the data - a positivist assumption that reflexive thematic analysis explicitly rejects (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis examined which codes clustered together ideologically, which appeared in tension with one another, and which patterns

cut across both brands rather than belonging to one alone. Five themes were generated from this process: Cultural Responsibility, Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability, Contested Sustainability Narratives, Artisan and Community Visibility, and Fashion Solutionism versus Craft Wisdom.

Phases 4 and 5: Reviewing and defining themes

In Braun and Clarke's (2022) fourth and fifth phases, themes are reviewed against the full dataset and refined until each theme has a clear central organising concept. The full dataset was returned to at this stage to test each theme's coherence: checking that the posts assigned to a theme genuinely shared an ideological logic, that the boundaries between themes were analytically meaningful, and that the themes collectively told a complete and coherent story about how sustainability is constructed and communicated across the two brands.

For example; in examining the Cultural Responsibility theme, posts assigned to C-02 (Craft signalling), C-05 (Artisan empowerment), and C-06 (Heritage & craft revival) were examined together to test whether they shared a coherent ideological logic. What emerged was that across these codes, sustainability was consistently communicated not through explicit environmental claims but through cultural continuity, artisan visibility, and craft heritage - confirming that Cultural Responsibility operated as a coherent organising concept rather than a loose grouping of related codes. Where codes appeared to overlap across themes most notably C-05 and C-12, which operated across both Cultural Responsibility and Artisan & Community Visibility - the distinction was resolved by analytical register: at the semantic level these codes captured what sustainability looked like in practice, whilst at the latent level they interrogated whose labour was recognised and in whose interests.

Theme generation was primarily inductive; patterns emerging from code clustering, though some themes were partially anticipated by the theoretical framework established in the literature review, consistent with the hybrid coding approach (Proudfoot, 2022).

Table 4: Themes and their associated codes

Theme	Codes	Code Names
Cultural Responsibility	C-01, C-02, C-03, C-04, C-05, C-06, C-12	Slow wardrobe narrative; Craft signalling; Product education; Lifestyle aspiration; Artisan empowerment; Heritage & craft revival; Community responsibility
Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability	C-07, C-08, C-09, C-10	Eco-material innovation; Green luxury aspiration; Vegan / cruelty-free; CSR narrative
Contested Sustainability Narratives	C-11, C-13	Greenwashing signals; Fashion solutionism
Artisan & Community Visibility	C-05, C-12	Artisan empowerment; Community responsibility
Fashion Solutionism vs Craft Wisdom	C-07, C-13	Eco-material innovation; Fashion solutionism

Phase 6: Writing up

The write-up phase, following Braun and Clarke's (2022), involves producing an analytical account of the themes that is grounded in the data and responsive to the research questions. The five themes presented in the Findings chapter represent the culmination of this process, each developed from the coded dataset and refined through iterative engagement with both the data and the theoretical framework. They represent the final iteration of a process that began with over thirty initial codes, moved through thirteen finalised codes, and arrived at five overarching themes through several stages of clustering, testing, and refinement against both the dataset and the research questions.

Table 6 compares the distribution of thematic codes across FabIndia and Stella McCartney, highlighting key differences in how sustainability is constructed and communicated.

Table 5: Bifurcation of codes across brands and themes

Theme	Description	Codes	FabIndia (Posts)	Stella McCartney (Posts)
Cultural Responsibility	Sustainability as cultural inheritance, embedded in craft, community, and everyday practice rather than explicitly declared.	C-01, C-02, C-03, C-04, C-05, C-06, C-12	28	0
Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability	Sustainability as premium aspiration and individual ethical identity, driven by innovation, celebrity, and consumer distinction.	C-07, C-08, C-09, C-10	0	16
Contested Sustainability Narratives	Ambiguous or selectively disclosed claims, including greenwashing, unattributed statistics, and shifting sustainability framings.	C-11, C-13	2	14
Artisan & Community Visibility	Representation of labour: artisan as subject (FabIndia) versus instrument (Stella McCartney).	C-05, C-12	5	1
Fashion Solutionism vs Craft Wisdom	Innovation as solution (Stella McCartney) versus traditional craft as inherently sustainable (FabIndia).	C-07, C-13	1	5

- *C-05 and C-12 appear in both Cultural Responsibility and Artisan & Community Visibility.*
- *C-07 and C-13 appear in both Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability and Fashion Solutionism vs Craft Wisdom.*

This overlap reflects the layered ideological content of individual posts, where the same code carries different analytical significance at semantic versus latent levels (Braun & Clarke, 2022)

Chapter 6: Findings and Analysis

6.1 Overview

This chapter presents the findings of a reflexive thematic analysis of 72 Instagram posts published by FabIndia and Stella McCartney between January and December 2025. The dataset was analysed using a hybrid inductive–deductive coding approach, resulting in a codebook of 13 codes (see Table 1).

While initial codes were informed by the research questions and existing literature, additional patterns emerged through iterative engagement with the data. Analysis was conducted at both semantic and latent levels, enabling the identification of recurring patterns as well as the examination of the broader ideological meanings underpinning these representations.

The analysis is organised around five themes generated through the coding process outlined in Chapter 4. The chapter proceeds thematically rather than by brand, placing FabIndia and Stella McCartney posts in direct comparison to highlight cross-cultural similarities and differences. Post captions are quoted directly where relevant, and Instagram like counts, recorded at the time of data collection, are used as an indicative (rather than definitive) measure of audience response.

The table below summarises the final codebook developed through this process.

Table 6: Codebook (reflexive thematic analysis)

Code ID	Code Name	Definition	Main Theme(s)
C-01	Slow wardrobe narrative	Constructs a complete outfit logic through layering, naming garments, materials, and functional reasoning. Sustainability is conveyed through intentionality and longevity rather than explicit claims.	Cultural Responsibility
C-02	Craft signalling	References handwoven, ajrak-printed, embroidered, or regional techniques, signalling artisanal origin and cultural heritage as sustainability.	Cultural Responsibility
C-03	Product education	Names materials, techniques, and functional properties; each post acts as a mini lookbook explaining what the product is made of and why.	Cultural Responsibility

C-04	Lifestyle aspiration	Sells a mood or way of living rather than a product claim; sustainability remains implicit within the aesthetic.	Cultural Responsibility
C-05	Artisan empowerment	Makes craftspeople visible through naming, community reference, or practice. The artisan appears as subject, not instrument.	Cultural Responsibility; Artisan & Community Visibility
C-06	Heritage & craft revival	References traditional textiles and techniques, linking products to cultural continuity.	Cultural Responsibility
C-07	Eco-material innovation	Highlights new materials or biotechnology, framing sustainability as scientific progress and innovation.	Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability; Fashion Solutionism vs Craft Wisdom
C-08	Green luxury aspiration	Positions sustainability as a premium identity marker for the conscious, affluent consumer.	Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability
C-09	Vegan / cruelty-free	Emphasises animal-free production, often supported by animal welfare claims or statistics.	Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability
C-10	CSR narrative	Focuses on corporate initiatives, reports, or partnerships, framing sustainability as institutional commitment.	Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability
C-11	Greenwashing signals	Captures vague, unverifiable, or selectively disclosed claims that perform sustainability without evidence.	Contested Sustainability Narratives
C-12	Community / collective responsibility	Frames sustainability as shared cultural duty through festivals, rituals, and collective practices rather than individual choice.	Cultural Responsibility; Artisan & Community Visibility
C-13	Fashion solutionism	Frames innovation as the primary solution to fashion's crisis, often marginalising traditional practices and labour conditions.	Contested Sustainability Narratives; Fashion Solutionism vs Craft Wisdom

6.2 Structural asymmetry between brands detected through themes

Before analysing individual posts, the theme distribution data (Table 7) reveals a clear structural asymmetry between the two brands. Cultural Responsibility emerges almost exclusively as FabIndia's dominant register, accounting for 28 of its 36 coded posts. In contrast, Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability is primarily associated with Stella McCartney, appearing in 16 of its 36 posts. Similarly, Contested Sustainability Narratives are largely concentrated within Stella McCartney's dataset (14 posts), with only marginal representation in FabIndia's content (2 posts).

This distribution is analytically significant. It suggests that the structural conditions for contested or potentially ambiguous sustainability narratives are more prevalent within the Western luxury model, whereas the Indian craft-based model appears comparatively less exposed to such tensions.

Table 7: Theme frequency by brand

Theme	FabIndia	Stella McCartney	Total
Cultural Responsibility	28	0	28
Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability	0	16	16
Contested Sustainability Narratives	2	14	16
Artisan & Community Visibility	5	1	6
Fashion Solutionism vs Craft Wisdom	1	5	6
Total	**36**	**36**	**72**

6.3 Theme 1. Cultural responsibility (FabIndia)

Cultural Responsibility is the dominant sustainability register within the FabIndia dataset, accounting for 28 of the brand's 36 coded posts, and it does not appear at all in the Stella McCartney dataset. This contrast reflects a fundamentally different ideological construction of sustainability. Stella McCartney presents sustainability as a forward-looking ethical stance, communicated through material innovation and the construction of a conscious consumer identity. In contrast, FabIndia frames sustainability as an inherited cultural practice. It is conveyed as something already embedded in everyday processes such as material selection, the marking of cultural occasions, and the transmission of knowledge across generations rather than as something newly adopted or explicitly performed. The term "sustainable" rarely appears in FabIndia's captions within this theme. The findings suggest that explicit labelling is not necessary, as references to craft, festivals, artisan practices, and intergenerational continuity implicitly communicate sustainability without directly naming it.

6.3.1 Sustainability as cultural continuity

FabIndia's most consistent sustainability strategy across the dataset is the embedding of craft within cultural celebration. Unlike Stella McCartney, whose sustainability

communication is built around explicit environmental claims, FabIndia makes comparatively few direct environmental assertions, rarely deploying the language of carbon, waste, or ecological impact. Instead, the brand positions its handcrafted textiles as the natural material of Indian festive life: the fabric through which community, devotion, and intergenerational identity are expressed (Khurana, 2022).

The Gurpurab reel published on 3 November 2025, co-posted with influencer Punjabi Sikh family content creators @thetunefulcouple, is the single most analytically significant post in the FabIndia dataset. The caption opens in Punjabi 'With Guru's grace, may every day be filled with light' language before any English or any product reference appears. Sustainability language is entirely absent. The post received 37,500 likes. At the semantic level, this post (see Post 1) contains no element that Western sustainability discourse would categorise as an explicit sustainability claim: no environmental statistics, no material certifications, no supply chain disclosures. At the latent level, the post carries a concentration of what this study identifies as ambient sustainability indicators: clothing made for multigenerational use, natural fibre, craft knowledge, intergenerational transmission, community participation in a centuries-old practice. The image does not argue for sustainability. It depicts a set of practices: the ochre silk kurta, the prayer beads, the multigenerational family gathering in which sustainability, as this study defines it, is already embedded as a condition of the practice itself (Khurana, 2022; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025).

This is the ideological distinction between performed and ambient sustainability at its most visible. Performed sustainability is declarative, it announces itself through explicit claims, quantified statistics, and deliberate ethical positioning. It requires an audience and depends on recognition. Ambient sustainability, by contrast, does not announce itself. It exists as a condition of practice rather than a communication strategy, embedded in the materials chosen, the occasions observed, the knowledge transmitted across generations. For example, the grandfather's kurta does not need to declare itself sustainable. It simply is. FabIndia's brand is not the source of the emotional resonance in this post. It is the vessel through which existing cultural emotion flows. The craft, the regional celebration, and the community identity that surrounds Gurpurab already existed long before FabIndia's Instagram account. The brand occupies the space where culture and commerce meet, present at the moment of cultural expression without being its origin. When 37,500 people engage with this content, the accompanying Punjabi-language caption and the devotional

register of the comments beneath it (discussed further below) which may point toward an audience reacting to cultural memory, family tradition, and regional belonging rather than engagement with FabIndia as a brand; likes alone cannot confirm individual motivation, so this reading remains interpretive rather than measured directly from the data. The engagement pattern indicates that the brand happened to be adjacent to that response rather than its cause. The decision to open in Punjabi before English can be seen as an ideological act on the part of FabIndia's brand communication team: a deliberate choice to centre the cultural community the occasion belongs to before addressing the wider English-speaking audience the platform reaches. In Entman's (1993) terms, the sequencing of languages is itself a framing decision: it determines whose world the post inhabits first, and whose it enters second. This bilingual caption strategy, regional language first, English second, recurs across FabIndia's three highest- performing posts: the Bengali New Year reel (5,798 likes, April), the Chhath Puja reel (25,600 likes, October), and the Gurpurab reel (37,500 likes, November). The deeper and more regionally specific the cultural identity, the higher the engagement. This directly supports Carranza et al.'s (2023) argument that collectivist cultures understand sustainability through community values and shared cultural identity rather than individualised ethical frameworks. This pattern indicates that, for this audience, sustainability is understood and valued primarily as cultural continuity rather than as an explicit environmental claim.

The Chhath Puja reel (25 October 2025), co-posted with @ekbihari a dedicated Bihari cultural identity account is the second most significant post in this sub-theme. The Hindi-first caption positions Chhath Puja as an authentically regional celebration before any English appears, and the comments section becomes an act of communal devotion: @kajuwithbarfi writes 'Jai Chathi Maiya,' multiple commenters invoke the Goddess by name, and the brand is absorbed into the ritual itself. FabIndia's name does not appear in any devotional comment, yet the post generates 25,600 likes. This may suggest the audience is responding to the craft and the festival as markers of cultural continuity, rather than to FabIndia as a brand.

The Bengali New Year reel (20 April 2025) extends this logic into eastern India. At 5,798 likes, this post received nearly six times more engagement than Stella McCartney's Earth Day SOS capsule published the same day (1,066 likes); a cross-brand comparison that speaks directly to how differently sustainability lands when communicated through cultural belonging versus environmental urgency. Cultural belonging, as this data

suggests, is a more powerful carrier of sustainability than environmental urgency alone, at least for an audience for whom sustainability has traditionally been part of everyday cultural practice rather than a cause more recently adopted.

6.3.2 Asymmetry of visibility

Stella's explicit register, however performative, ensures sustainability enters public discourse: it names problems, circulates statistics, and creates conversation (Henninger et al., 2016; Testa et al., 2021). FabIndia's sustainability communication, by contrast, is embedded in lived cultural and craft practice rather than made explicit as a claim, yet it remains largely invisible within global sustainability discourse because it does not speak the language that gets recognised (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025). The frameworks through which sustainability communication is evaluated: explicitness, quantification, institutional validation are Eurocentric frameworks, built to recognise Western modes of environmental communication whilst remaining structurally unable to see what FabIndia is doing (Mignolo, 2007; Patara & Nayak, 2025). The real sustainability work goes unrecognised not because it is absent, but because the measuring stick was never designed to find it (Spivak, 1988; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025).

6.3.3 The slow wardrobe narrative and craft as implicit claim

A second strategy within this theme is FabIndia's Slow Wardrobe Narrative: the positioning of natural, handcrafted textiles as the material of intentional, seasonal, climate-appropriate dressing rather than trend-driven consumption. This code emerged inductively from FabIndia's dataset, capturing a communicative logic that shares conceptual ground with slow fashion scholarship, something Western sustainable fashion discourse has recently codified under the banner of slow fashion without ever naming it.

The January layering reel 'Layers of My Day: Winter Mornings' exemplifies this most directly. The caption names each garment with functional reasoning: Layer 1 Blue Cotton Dabu-Printed Tunic, Layer 2 Natural Linen Wide-Leg Casual Pant, Layer 3 Blue Wool Shawl. There is no environmental claim. The sustainability argument is constructed entirely through material logic. The choice of cotton, linen, and wool: natural, breathable,

season-appropriate fibres does the sustainability work quietly: longevity, material integrity, and climate-responsiveness communicated through what the garment is made of. In this sense, it may be suggested the material itself carries the claim, rather than using any explicit language to showcase sustainability.

The Chikankari carousel (see Post 2, 25 February 2025) maps the entire journey of Lucknow's Chikankari embroidery across specific city locations: block carving at Nakhas, printing at Kaiserganj, washing at the Gomti river, embroidery at Hazratganj. The word 'sustainable' does not appear in the caption. Sustainability is present instead in the form of geographical specificity, artisan visibility, and material traceability: the post tells its audience precisely where the fabric comes from and who makes it, step by step. This is the ambient sustainability register in its most methodical form. Instead of naming sustainability, the posts simply let the artisans, their towns, and their crafts speak and be understood for themselves in unsaid ways.

The Svarnim festive campaign launch (20 July 2025) represents the dataset's most craft-dense single caption. Svarnim, derived from the Sanskrit word for golden, frames the festive season as a journey through India's material heritage rather than a commercial sale. The caption names eight distinct regional textile techniques in a single sentence: Gota Patti*, Banarasi*, Chanderi*, Pittal Brass*, Gold Khari*, Maheshwari*, Ghicha Silk*, and Aari*. Here, sustainability is communicated through inventory, not claim. Each named technique represents a distinct regional craft tradition - Banarasi silk weaving from Varanasi*, Chanderi weaves from Madhya Pradesh*, Maheshwari from the banks of the Narmada*, each carrying centuries of embedded knowledge, natural materials, and community practice rooted in specific geographies. Naming them like this grounds the craft as an inherent sustainability record (Khurana, 2022; Patara & Nayak, 2025), carrying a deeper ecological wisdom that needs no modern translation.

The Independence Day post published on 12 August 2025 carries the dataset's most politically confident brand statement: 'Tiranga* India ka, Kurta Fabindia ka' - 'The Tricolour belongs to India, the Kurta belongs to Fabindia.' This is craft identity fused with national identity, a positioning that Western sustainability discourse cannot access or replicate. The white cotton kurta is not simply a garment; it is a political and cultural statement whose sustainability argument is inseparable from its meaning as an emblem of Indian self-determination. The sustainability argument here is never stated directly. Presenting the kurta as indigenous and handmade points to small-scale, non-industrial

production, in contrast to mass-produced fast fashion. Cultural authenticity is doing the work an environmental claim would normally do, even though no environmental language appears.

6.3.4 The silence on behind-the-scenes production of natural fibre

FabIndia's cultural sustainability register is not without its tensions. The brand consistently signals skin-friendly, natural fibres such as cotton, wool, linen, silk, cashmere yet never addresses how those fibres are processed and produced beyond the craft stage. The conditions in which sheep are kept for wool, the farming practices behind the cotton supply chain, the chemical processes involved in silk production, none of these appear anywhere in the dataset.

The cashmere post (see Post 3) published on 19 December 2025 makes this gap most visible. The caption describes cashmere as 'soft gold, harvested from the delicate undercoat of goats that roam the frost-shattered peaks of Central Asia,' positioning the product as 'pieces of art that will only improve with the passage of time.' The care guide slide addresses garment longevity. Yet the supply chain between the Himalayan goat and the finished product is entirely unaddressed. The post does not discuss how the fibre was dyed, processed, or transported. The implicit claim that natural origin equals sustainable production is, as Lyon and Montgomery (2015) warn, as strategically useful as any explicit greenwashing claim, and arguably harder to notice, since it works through cultural assumption instead of marketing language.

6.3.5 Explicit claims and institutional legibility

The World Environment Day carousel published on 5 June 2025, is the only post in which FabIndia deploys explicit, data-driven sustainability language prominently: 'At FabIndia sustainability isn't a trend - it's our tradition. 95–100% of our raw materials are of natural origin. 67% of our products are made using hand-based processes.', Co-branded with the United Nations Environment Programme. It received 97 likes - FabIndia's lowest engagement in the entire dataset. The most explicitly environmental post the brand produced across the entire year reached almost no one. This finding is not merely about

audience preference. It reveals something structurally important: the moment FabIndia speaks in the language of Western environmental discourse, such as quantified claims, crisis statistics, institutional co-branding, the data suggests it does not resonate with its audience in the way that culturally embedded content consistently does. This directly supports Carranza et al.'s (2023) argument that collectivist cultures understand sustainability through shared social norms, community values and cultural identity rather than through individualised, data-driven environmental frameworks built around personal ethical choice, measurable climate impact, and accountability on paper.

The B Corp tribute post published on 27 June 2025 mourning the passing of Andrew Kassoy, co-founder of B Lab adds a further institutional dimension to this theme. Where most FabIndia posts communicate sustainability through craft, culture, and festival, this post positions the brand within a global ethical business framework. FabIndia's B Corp certification connects its Gandhian craft heritage to a contemporary international accountability structure, the only post in the dataset that bridges these two registers explicitly.

6.3.6 Gandhian genealogy: L.C. Jain centenary analysis

The L.C. Jain centenary carousel published on 14 December 2025 is the most historically significant post in the FabIndia dataset. Lakshmi Chand Jain was the man who introduced FabIndia's founder John Bissell to India's craft traditions, and whose Gandhian principles shaped the brand's mission from its inception in 1960. Lakshmi Chand Jain's life connected directly to Gandhi's swadeshi philosophy, the use of local handcraft as political resistance against British textile imports, which predates the Brundtland Commission's 1987 definition of sustainable development by 65 years. The caption describes Jain as 'a towering figure whose principles were forged in the Gandhian movement.' The India International Centre venue is itself significant - New Delhi's pre-eminent institution for intellectual and policy discourse, not a fashion venue. FabIndia is positioning itself within India's independence-movement heritage, not within Western sustainable fashion's institutional apparatus. This post makes explicit what is implicit throughout the Cultural Responsibility theme: FabIndia's sustainability model does not descend from Western environmental discourse. It descends from a different political and philosophical tradition entirely, one that understood craft as social dignity, economic sovereignty, and a form of

anti-colonial resistance (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Mignolo, 2007). Craft, in this tradition, was not an aesthetic choice or a market positioning - it was a political act. To spin your own cloth was to refuse British industry. To buy handwoven was to invest in Indian labour rather than colonial capital. Economic sovereignty meant keeping production local, keeping knowledge with the maker, keeping value within the community.

6.3.7 What Theme 1. Reveals about RQ2

If the Gurpurab grandfather's ochre silk kurta represents ambient sustainability in its most unmediated form, and the L.C. Jain centenary post (see Post 4) is the most historically significant finding in this chapter for RQ2, then this theme collectively illuminates that research question. RQ2 asks what cultural ideologies underpin these sustainability narratives and how they differ between Western luxury and Indian craft-based models. The answer, as this theme demonstrates, is Gandhian in its roots: craft as political resistance, collective economic dignity, and cultural sovereignty.

6.4 Theme 2: luxury lifestyle sustainability (Stella McCartney)

Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability accounts for 16 of Stella McCartney's 36 coded posts and is entirely absent from the FabIndia dataset. Sustainability in this theme is communicated primarily through three interlocking strategies: celebrity proximity, quantified material claims, and the construction of an ethical consumer identity that collapses personal distinction and environmental responsibility into a single purchasable position. As Al-Issa (2024) identifies, Western luxury brands deploy sustainability as an aspirational identity marker and the Stella McCartney dataset provides a direct empirical illustration of this mechanism.

What the full year of content makes unmistakable is the emotional architecture through which this mechanism operates. Stella McCartney's engagement strategy is built on manufactured emotional resonance. Linda McCartney's home video footage, Stella's personal relationship with horses, Taylor Swift's concert moments carefully deployed to make luxury consumption feel personally meaningful. The audience responds with desire, aspiration, and parasocial identification*. This is a fundamentally transactional emotional

register: the brand offers a feeling and the consumer purchases it. This study theorises this process as 'affective purchasing': sustainability converted into identity, aspiration, and emotional resonance, rather than into structural information about how anything is actually made.

6.4.1 Portrayal of celebrity as sustainable carrier (Stella McCartney)

The Winter 25 show celebrity carousel (see Post 5, 7 March 2025), featuring Kate Moss, Cameron Diaz, Anna Wintour, Tom Ford, and Ice Spice, received 19,400 likes, nearly three times more than the runway collection post published the same day, which foregrounded garment construction and sustainable materials. No sustainability claim appears in Post 5's caption. The post's function is aspirational positioning: sustainability is implied through association with cultural authority and luxury status rather than stated through any environmental argument. This pattern is consistent with Dabas and Whang's (2022) finding that social signalling drives engagement with green luxury identity far more reliably than the specificity or verifiability of environmental claims.

The Taylor Swift paparazzi carousel (see Post 6, 5 November 2025) a candid image of Swift wearing Stella McCartney's mycelium snakeskin-alternative boots on a New York street received 12,000 likes, among the highest engagement figures in the Stella dataset. The sustainability claim embedded in the caption 'mycelium-based alternative to snakeskin' is specific and verifiable. Yet the comments dataset reveals no engagement with the material claim; the audience responded to Taylor Swift, not to mycelium. Post 6 is analytically significant precisely because the sustainability claim is present and the audience's response to it, as indicated by comment content, is effectively absent.

The Beyoncé crystal bodysuit post published on 11 July 2025 illustrates the reverse pattern. Here, a specific and verifiable sustainability claim ‘lead-free crystals’, ‘handcrafted in the London atelier’ is rendered negligible by celebrity spectacle. The post received 6,576 likes, yet no comment in the dataset references lead-free crystals or sustainability. @mstinaknowles (Beyoncé's mother) writes 'Stella killed this fit.' The craft process slides showing atelier hands placing individual crystals are positioned between concert performance shots, and the audience data suggests the audience responded to the performance rather than the material claim. This is consistent with the finding that social

value and status signalling drive engagement with green identity far more consistently than the specificity or verifiability of environmental claims (Testa et al., 2021).

6.4.2 Framing of the green luxury aspirations through narratives

The Selena Gomez recycled knits carousel (see Post 7, 10 April 2025) exemplifies the brand's content formula most precisely. The post pairs a specific material claim 'recycled knits' with images of Selena Gomez in a pale blue cloud knit dress across multiple Vogue masthead appearances. The sustainability claim is present and specific. The visual content is entirely aspirational. This post received 26,500 likes, the highest engagement figure in the Stella dataset for April 2025, against 1,066 likes for the Earth Day SOS capsule published in the same month. The approximately 25:1 ratio between celebrity content with an embedded sustainability claim and explicit sustainability content should be treated as indicative rather than conclusive. Follower counts and algorithmic factors affect both but the pattern is consistent with Testa et al.'s (2021) finding that aspirational lifestyle content consistently outperforms explicit environmental messaging on brand Instagram accounts.

The Earth Day SOS capsule (20 April 2025), published eight days later and containing Stella's most substantively ethical claim of the month - regenerative, recycled, and organic materials, plus a $200 million investment fund for sustainable innovators received only 1,066 likes. The contrast is analytically suggestive: the most celebrity-driven post in April gets 26,500 likes; the most substantively environmental post gets 1,066. The brand's most ethical content reaches the fewest people. This suggests the audience is drawn by celebrity affect rather than environmental messaging: where celebrities amplify reach, direct sustainability claims recede into near-invisibility, which fits what the literature identifies as sustainability's function in Western contexts: something people wear as a signal of ethical taste more often than they act on it (Dabas & Whang, 2022; Testa et al., 2021).

The Stella McCartney personal vintage home video published on 11 May 2025 featuring Stella as a child with her mother Linda McCartney received 8,417 likes. Sustainability appears only in the phrases 'Mother Earth's creatures' and 'beauty of nature,' yet Linda McCartney's name carries decades of animal rights associations for this brand's audience. The audience is not being asked to act sustainably; they are being invited to feel close to someone who embodied it. This is Henninger et al.'s (2016) empty vessel argument at its

most refined: sustainability transmitted not through verified claims or data but through grief, memory, and biographical feeling bypassing the fact-checking that an explicit environmental claim would normally invite.

6.4.3 Framing selective visibility: animal welfare foregrounded, labour rights absent

Stella McCartney's brand communication is consistent and specific on animal welfare: fur, leather, exotic skins, feathers, and vegan alternatives recur with notable frequency and detail across the 2025 dataset. Yet the dataset reveals a parallel and equally consistent silence on labour conditions, worker welfare, and the environmental footprint of its synthetic material alternatives. By focusing on what materials are not used rather than on how and where garments are produced, the brand constructs a sustainability identity that is entirely product-facing and consumer-facing. The ethical frame is selectively constructed: specific on animal welfare, silent on the conditions of human labour (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Alizadeh & Liscio, 2024). The consumer gets enough information to feel confident in the brand's ethics, but not enough to see the broader conditions of production.

In the comment section of the Laptop to Lapdance runway post published on 10 September 2025, @unreally_anna directly challenged the brand: 'What about the animals in Palestine? You used @moroccanoil on the models on your runway, they operate on occupied land where animals and humans have been bulldozed over.' The claim is verifiable on two counts: Moroccanoil was the official lead hair brand for Stella McCartney's Summer 2025 Paris Fashion Week show (COS Beauty, 2025), and Moroccanoil is an Israeli-owned company whose manufacturing facilities are located in Israel, making it a subject of formal boycott campaigns by Palestinian civil society organisations since 2012 (Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, 2012). This is the only instance of political accountability being raised in the comment section of either brand's dataset - raised not by a journalist or activist but by a consumer, publicly. It remained visible in the dataset at time of coding, unanswered by the brand. As Henninger et al. (2016) argue, when sustainability becomes a brand's primary identity claim, the standard of accountability to which that brand is held rises accordingly and the distance between claim and practice becomes correspondingly more visible.

The camera, across all 36 Stella posts and the full year of 2025, never turns toward the factory. The Ryder bag post (August 2025) is the single exception. The caption states: 'We have retrained leather artisans to work with our vegan alternatives, protecting human and environmental health. Leather tanning uses harmful chemicals, with cancer rates among tannery workers being 20% to 50% higher.' Even here, the retrained artisans are named as beneficiaries of the brand's ethical transition, not as independent workers with wages, conditions, and rights.

This silence on labour rights, as evidenced above, is not incidental. Rather than expecting posts to function as supply chain reports, the concern here is that a brand which actively uses Instagram to make animal welfare claims, cite ocean pollution statistics, and position itself as the ethical choice, while remaining silent on labour conditions, appears to be making a selective choice about which forms of harm get made visible, and that selectivity may itself carry ideological weight. The posts find room to name every animal but not the people who make the clothes (Huggard & Choudhary, 2025; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015).

6.5 Theme 3: Contested Sustainability Narratives

Contested Sustainability Narratives is present in 14 of Stella McCartney's 36 posts and only 2 of FabIndia's. This distribution reflects a structural difference in how the two brands communicate sustainability. Stella McCartney makes explicit, verifiable claims that can be contested; FabIndia operates predominantly through cultural storytelling. It’s sustainability communicated through craft, ritual, and community rather than through verifiable environmental statements, and therefore generating no claims that can be contested. A festival makes no environmental claim; there is nothing to fact-check. As demonstrated in Theme 1, FabIndia's cultural storytelling issues no sustainability statement. There is no gap between claim and reality because there is no claim at all. This absence of claim also places the post outside the analytical category of greenwashing, which by definition requires an explicit promise against which performance can be measured.

6.5.1 Crises to product pipeline

The crisis-to-product pipeline is the most consistently recurring structural pattern in the Stella McCartney dataset and the clearest expression of fashion solutionism (Huggard & Choudhary, 2025), the framing of material technology and brand innovation as the answer to industrial-scale environmental and animal welfare crises. The crisis establishes moral urgency, the villain externalises blame onto an industry or practice rather than the brand itself, and the product arrives as both solution and redemption, the consumer's purchase becoming an act of participation in fixing the very crisis the brand has just made vivid. The ethical weight of the problem is transferred onto the product, and by extension, onto the act of buying it. In effect, whatever anxiety the crisis narrative generates in the opening frames of the post is resolved by its closing frames, with the product positioned as the mechanism of that resolution.

The World Oceans Day reel (see Post 8), published on 8 June 2025, is the most structurally complete example of the crisis-to-product pipeline in the entire Stella McCartney dataset. The reel opens with ghost fishing nets entangling marine life, moves through escalating statistics 'Discarded fishing gear threatens 66% of marine animals,' 'including 300,000 whales and dolphins every year' then pivots: 'There is no such thing as sustainable fishing, but there is sustainable fashion. We recycle discarded fishing nets into regenerated nylon.' The reel closes with a dolphin swimming freely and a Sea Shepherd donation call. It received 10,100 likes. This follows what Huggard and Choudhary (2025) call fashion solutionism: the environmental crisis is presented as a problem that the brand's own material innovation can solve, with the product itself standing in as the solution.

This pipeline appears in the same structural sequence across at least six posts in the Stella dataset: the adidas x Stella horse and frog reel (February), the World Oceans Day reel (June), the Rock Royalty python carousel (June), the FEVVERS ostriches reel (October), the Sequinova microplastics documentary reel (November), and the Battersea cat adoption carousel (December). Across these posts, the crisis changes - horses, dolphins, pythons, ostriches, microplastics, domestic cats but the formula does not. It names a different villain, and closes with a different product. But the architecture is identical every time: urgency, blame, resolution through purchase. The brand goes beyond simple green claims by leaning into a recurring story, one that begins with a crisis and inevitably concludes with its own heroic intervention.

6.5.2 Cross-brand juxtaposition : 5 June and 8 June, 2025

The most analytically direct cross-brand comparison in the dataset is a pair of posts separated by three days in June 2025. On 5 June, World Environment Day, FabIndia published Post 9, its most explicitly environmental caption of the year, receiving 97 likes. On 8 June, World Oceans Day, Stella McCartney published Post 8, the World Oceans Day reel building from ghost fishing net imagery to a regenerated nylon product, receiving 10,100 likes. This comparison should be interpreted cautiously: the two brands have different follower counts and audience compositions, and like counts alone cannot provide a complete picture. Nonetheless, the pattern is analytically suggestive: explicit environmental claims rooted in cultural identity reach substantially fewer people than sustainability packaged as material innovation and crisis resolution. Whether this reflects audience preference, platform algorithmic logic, or cultural mismatch between FabIndia's sustainability register and global environmental discourse is a question this study's data cannot settle.

6.5.3 The rotating sustainability frames strategy

Another structural pattern within Contested Sustainability Narratives is Stella McCartney's rotating sustainability frames strategy - the deployment of different and sometimes incompatible sustainability registers across consecutive posts rather than a single consistent message. Within June alone, the brand publishes a vegan brand heritage post (Generation Falabella, 4 June), an ocean crisis activism post (World Oceans Day, 8 June), and a bio-material seasonal collection reveal (Rock Royalty, 14 June) - three completely different sustainability arguments in one month, none of which builds on or references the others. In November, the rotation accelerates: the Sequinova science documentary (3 November) speaks the language of laboratory science and material innovation, the Taylor Swift mycelium boots paparazzi candid (5 November) speaks the language of celebrity aspiration, and the Ryder horse personal essay (11 November) speaks the language of grief and personal memory. Each deploys laboratory science, mega-celebrity aspiration, and intimate personal narrative as interchangeable sustainability vehicles within nine days.

By cycling through sustainability frames, the brand maintains the appearance of

comprehensive ethical engagement - scientific, aspirational, and personal without committing to any single accountability framework. No single frame stays long enough to be scrutinised. This connects directly to Henninger et al.'s (2016) empty vessel argument: the vessel is refilled continuously, with scientific claims, celebrity association, and appeals to grief each serving briefly as content before being replaced, none of them examined in depth.

The Avaline wine collaboration post published on 15 July 2025 featuring Stella McCartney celebrating her 'clean wine' partnership with Cameron Diaz, with zero sustainability content and yet 8,804 likes, Stella's highest engagement in July represents the rotating frames strategy at its most expanded: the brand's ethical identity has become so culturally established that lifestyle adjacency* alone carries enough sustainability credibility to generate massive engagement with no claim whatsoever (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024).

6.5.4 The unattributed statistics pattern

Running across both the crisis-to-product pipeline and the rotating frames strategy is a recurring technique that warrants specific identification: the deployment of alarming, specific-sounding statistics that are unattributed to any source. Across the dataset, Stella McCartney references: 'over 1 billion animals killed for leather annually' (January); '6 million horses killed for food, leather, glue and more' (February); 'fashion pollution contributing to the extinction of 40% of amphibians' (February); 'by 2030, an estimated 75% of clothing will be synthetic materials' (April); '92 million tonnes of clothing waste produced annually' (May); 'over 500,000 pythons killed for fashion in Southeast Asia alone' (November); '100,000 waterbirds killed by lead annually in the UK alone' (December). Not one of these statistics is attributed to a specific study, organisation, or data source within the post. These statistics function as what Henninger et al. (2016) describe as claims that sound authoritative but are unverifiable, designed to produce anxiety, moral urgency, and guilt - emotions immediately resolved by the brand's product or material innovation.

The December lead-free crystal post (5 December 2025) introduces the dataset's most remarkable qualification: the asterisk. The caption states 'Our crystals are lead-free*' and

then adds in smaller text: '*Our crystals are almost entirely lead-free, though some may have small traces (containing 0.0009% or less).' This is Lyon and Montgomery's (2015) selective disclosure in real time: the headline claim is made; the qualification is present but positioned to minimise its impact. What is striking is that the brand clearly knew the headline needed a reality check, yet chose to tuck that truth away in an asterisk instead of saying it out loud. In doing so, the brand separates the headline from reality. Instead of honestly stating, "Our crystals contain trace lead levels of less than 0.0009%" (which would be an integrated caveat), they proclaimed an absolute: "Our crystals are lead-free", and then banished the inconvenient truth down into an asterisk. This separation is the exact mechanism of selective disclosure at work.

6.5.5 The shared silence on labour accountability across both brands

The most significant finding within this theme extends across both brands is that neither Stella McCartney nor FabIndia substantively engages with supply chain transparency, labour conditions, or worker welfare in their 2025 Instagram content. Stella's August post on retrained leather artisans and the July Nasabia/TANORA reel are the closest the brand comes to acknowledging craft labour, but both position the brand as a benefactor rather than as accountable to workers' structural rights. FabIndia's artisan visibility is more genuine - the Women's Day loom portraits, the Lucknow Chikankari geography, and the archival tributes to Suraiya Hasan Bose and Pandi Ram Mandavi all show craft labour with dignity and specificity but FabIndia never discusses wages, working conditions, or supply chain accountability in any post across the year. Both brands foreground their respective sustainability strengths while structural labour rights remain entirely outside either brand's Instagram frame. Supply chain accountability is equally absent from both datasets, confirming what Khurana (2022) and Maheshwari et al. (2025) identify in the literature: craft visibility does not translate into labour rights visibility.

Within this dataset at least, sustainable fashion communication in 2025 appears not to have internalised supply chain accountability as a core communication responsibility though whether this reflects a broader industry pattern or the specific choices of these two brands remains beyond the scope of this study. The consumer-facing sustainability narrative and the worker-facing accountability narrative remain entirely disconnected

from each other.

6.5.6 FabIndia's contested narratives

FabIndia's two posts within this theme are both coded C-11 (greenwashing signals) and both reflect the natural fibre silence identified in Theme 1. The World Environment Day carousel's implicit claim that craft tradition equals sustainability, and the cashmere post's positioning of a luxury natural fibre as inherently conscious, both carry unexamined assumptions about the relationship between naturalness and ethical production. Saying nothing about animal welfare while selling animal fibers quietly works in the brand's favor, letting the sheer romance of raw cashmere stand in for actual ethical accountability.

6.6 Theme 4: Artisan and Community Visibility

Artisan and Community Visibility accounts for only 6 posts across the entire sample 5 from FabIndia, 1 from Stella McCartney yet it carries disproportionate analytical weight for both research questions. Who is made visible in a brand's sustainability communication, under what conditions, and in whose interests, reveals more about the ideological architecture of that communication than almost any other single variable. As Entman (1993) argues, framing is inherently selective: what is included in the frame defines what is visible, and what is excluded defines what cannot be questioned. Deciding who gets a voice and who is just used as a backdrop exposes whether a brand is actually committed to its workers, or simply using them to look good.

Table 8: Labour representation by brand

Aspect	FabIndia	Stella McCartney
Visibility of Labour	Frequent	Rare
Role of Artisan	Subject	Supporting
Context	Cultural celebration	Product / innovation
Direction of Gratitude	Brand acknowledges artisan	Artisan acknowledges brand

The table highlights a clear divergence in labour representation, with FabIndia foregrounding artisans as central subjects, while Stella McCartney positions labour as peripheral to product-focused narratives.

6.6.1 FabIndia: the portrayal of artisan as subject

FabIndia's five posts within this theme share a consistent ideological orientation: the artisan is the subject of the communication, not its instrument. Craftspeople are named, photographed, honoured, and credited as the carriers of a living cultural tradition, not as evidence of a brand's ethical supply chain, but as individuals whose knowledge, labour, and community embody the sustainability the brand claims to represent.

The Women's Day carousel published on 8 March 2025 is the clearest expression of this orientation. Where the equivalent period of Stella McCartney's calendar was dominated by Kate Moss, Cameron Diaz, and Anna Wintour at the Winter 25 show (19,400 likes), FabIndia used International Women's Day to photograph real artisan women at their looms and embroidery frames no models, no celebrities, no studio lighting. The carousel includes twelve slides of actual FabIndia employees, weavers, and store teams. The labour is visible here not as a sustainability credential but as a cultural celebration. The loom is not shown to prove that FabIndia's supply chain is ethical it is shown because the woman at the loom is worth showing. This distinction matters enormously: when labour visibility functions as a credential, the worker is co-opted into the brand's narrative; when it functions as celebration, the brand steps back to hold space for the artisan's own story.

The archival tribute posts published in October and November 2025 honouring textile revivalist Suraiya Hasan Bose and Padma Shri awardee Pandi Ram Mandavi respectively, extend this logic into FabIndia's most historically significant artisan visibility content. Both use the same parchment aesthetic and botanical border illustration, confirming a deliberate editorial series.

The Suraiya Hasan Bose carousel (8 October 2025) is the richest single expression of craft knowledge as ecological knowledge, the understanding that sustainable making is inseparable from knowing the land, its materials, its seasons, and its limits. Bose spent her life working with natural dyes derived from jaggery, indigo plants, flowers, and tree bark, reconstructing thread counts, and reviving the himru weave* tradition in Andhra Pradesh. The caption quote - 'She knew every leaf on that land and would have been aware of the loss of even one flower if someone had plucked it', is the most ecologically resonant line

in the entire FabIndia dataset, and it appears in a tribute to a weaver, not an environmentalist. This is the ideological argument. Western sustainability discourse produces environmentalists, people who adopt ecological concern as a position (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025). FabIndia makes most powerfully through its artisan visibility content: that the deepest form of environmental knowledge is craft knowledge, and that the people who carry it are the original custodians of sustainable living.

Mandavi's post (14 November 2025) is particularly significant: a tribal woodcraft master from Bastar*, one of India's most conflict-affected and economically marginalised regions, is shown receiving India's fourth-highest civilian honour from the President. The caption notes he has trained over 1,000 artisans, and that his creations have travelled 'from Narayanpur to Naples.' 'He didn't speak the same language as his audiences, yet his art needed no translation.' The accompanying language noting that his art needed no translation directly challenges the assumption that sustainability knowledge must be communicated in English-language discourse to have global reach (Patara & Nayak, 2025).

Together, these posts confirm something about FabIndia's content strategy that no single post communicates alone: the brand positions itself not as a retailer of handcrafted products but as a custodian of craft knowledge. Knowledge transmission - Mandavi training 1,000 artisans, Bose reviving the himru weave is the measure of sustainability impact that FabIndia deploys, not carbon reduction targets or material innovation percentages. In this register, sustainability is measured by whether the knowledge survives at all. That is a fundamentally different definition of impact from anything in the Stella McCartney dataset.

A further dimension of community visibility appears in the community library partnership post (April 2025), in which FabIndia partnered with a Dr. Seuss-inspired initiative to support young readers. No craft content, no product, no sustainability keywords in the conventional sense yet this is one of FabIndia's most substantive acts of community investment in the dataset. Here, sustainability goes beyond the craft by simply supporting a community-initiative. It also reflects that sustainability for FabIndia is flexible rather than fixed (because it doesn't have any performative sustainability narratives to stick by). Funding books for young readers might not fit standard sustainability's criteria, but on the ground, supporting the next generation is its own form of long-term survival.

6.6.2 The Malaysia runway: craft as cultural diplomacy

FabIndia's July 2025 dataset offers a further dimension of artisan and community visibility. The FabIndia Malaysia 10th anniversary runway event (9 July 2025) differs markedly from a fashion show in the Western luxury sense: there are no celebrity front rows, no editorial photographers, and no sustainability statistics. Instead, the event centres a Bharatanatyam* classical dance performance, a diplomatic reception attended by the Deputy High Commissioner of India to Malaysia and a Malaysian government minister, and a community of women in handloom sarees.

The Malaysia 10th anniversary content (see Post 10) raises a further analytical tension. FabIndia presents a genuinely culturally rooted event, a Bharatanatyam performance, a diplomatic reception, a community of women in handloom sarees and then runs it through the same Instagram logic as any other brand: the performance becomes a carousel, the diplomatic reception becomes a caption, #CraftCultureConnection becomes a hashtag. What the Malaysia post demonstrates is that ambient sustainability, even at its most culturally grounded, is not fully insulated from the communicative logic of platform performance. The moment a cultural event is posted on Instagram, even the most embedded practice is partially drawn into the logic of constructed visibility. This finding may suggest that FabIndia’s posts cannot simply be taken at face value; they demand a critical dissection too.

6.6.3 Stella McCartney: The artisan as instrument

Stella McCartney's single post within this theme - the Nasabia/TANORA reel published on 12 July 2025 is the most analytically complex post in the entire Stella dataset, the moment the brand comes closest to genuine artisan visibility, while simultaneously demonstrating the limits of what that visibility can mean within a luxury brand framework. For the first time, Stella McCartney names an individual artisan, gives her a voice, and documents her craft process. Nasabia, a Malagasy crafter and TANORA designer, speaks directly to camera about learning crochet from her family. The material claim is specific and verifiable: renewable, locally sourced raffia. On the surface, this resembles FabIndia's artisan empowerment model entirely.

The structural difference lies in the final image: a natural raffia tote bag with 'STELLA McCARTNEY' woven into its body in circular lettering. Nasabia's name is in the reel title. The brand's name is on the product. In FabIndia's artisan posts, the craft belongs structurally to the artisan and to the cultural tradition they carry. In this Stella post, Nasabia's craft is sourced from Madagascar, attached to a Western luxury brand, and sold at stellamccartney.com. The comment from @tanoradesign 'Thank you for the support' is perhaps the most analytically revealing detail in the post. The partner organisation thanks Stella McCartney for the platform. In FabIndia's equivalent posts, no artisan thanks FabIndia; FabIndia thanks them. The direction of expressed gratitude maps, in this data, the direction of structural power (Patara & Nayak, 2025).

The post received 468 likes, Stella McCartney's lowest engagement figure in July, published one day before the Beyoncé crystal bodysuit post which received 6,576 likes. The approximately 14:1 ratio between these two posts may suggest a pattern consistent with Dabas and Whang's (2022) argument: that Stella McCartney's audience responds more strongly to celebrity aspiration than to craft labour visibility. This interpretation should be treated cautiously, as like counts represent only one dimension of audience response and follower context would be needed for a more complete picture. Even so, the artisan remains a background detail in the brand's story, and the low engagement numbers show that followers treat them the same way.

6.7 Theme 5: Fashion Solutionism versus Craft Wisdom

Fashion Solutionism versus Craft Wisdom is the theme that directly maps onto the theoretical framework established in the literature review and the one that most directly answers RQ2: what cultural ideologies underpin these sustainability narratives, and how do they differ between Western luxury sustainability and Indian craft-based sustainability models? It accounts for 5 of Stella McCartney's posts and 1 of FabIndia's, but its analytical reach extends well beyond those numbers. The ideological opposition it names as technology and material innovation as the solution to fashion's environmental crisis, versus traditional craft practices as inherently sustainable runs as an undercurrent through the entire dataset, surfacing most explicitly in the posts coded here but present implicitly across both brands' full year of content.

The conceptual foundation for this theme is Huggard and Choudhary's (2025) identification of fashion solutionism as discussed in the Literature Review as a discourse so concentrated on technological fixes that the human conditions of production, older traditions of making, and non-Western knowledge systems are rendered structurally invisible. When sustainability is defined as a problem that technology must solve, the question of what already exists outside that framework, craft traditions that have sustained communities for centuries without industrial intervention is effectively foreclosed. Entman's (1993) framing theory provides the analytical mechanism: by defining the sustainability problem as one requiring technological remediation, these frames simultaneously exclude solutions that do not fit within that definition.

Patara and Nayak (2025) extend this argument, contending that the mindset that created unsustainability is now being applied to address it, bandaging the damage industrialisation caused without altering its structure. Material innovation, certification frameworks, and green branding are products of the same Western market system that produced the crisis; they address its symptoms while leaving its structure intact. Western sustainability discourse reproduces the Eurocentric framework it claims to challenge, simply by assuming that the solution must be new, technological, and Western in origin.

Schumacher's (1973) analysis explains the fallout of historical choices about which forms of knowledge were worth keeping. As Western industry dismantled small-scale, localized production to satisfy capital's need for rapid growth, countless traditional practices disappeared. Today, instead of questioning that loss, the fashion industry simply offers technological "solutionism" as a band-aid.

6.7.1 Stella McCartney: Nature as Raw Material Narrative

Stella McCartney's five posts within this theme represent the brand's most scientifically elaborated sustainability content. FEVVERS - the world's first plant-based cruelty-free alternative to feathers - Sequinova biobased sequins derived from wood and renewable feedstock, mycelium-based snakeskin alternatives, and regenerated nylon recycled from discarded fishing nets are all named, specific, and in several cases genuinely innovative material claims. These are real technologies, developed by identifiable companies, doing documented work to replace conventional materials whose production causes verified

harm.

The Sequinova documentary reel published on 3 November 2025 is Stella's most scientifically elaborate sustainability post. Co-posted with @sequinova, it is structured as a five-act science film: microplastics crisis (35% of the world's microplastics originate in the fashion industry), laboratory bioreactor (cellulose mixed with bioengineered proteins and microorganism pigments), founder testimony (Clare Lichfeld speaking directly to camera: 'We turned to nature for that solution'), atelier hands threading sequins, Paris Fashion Week catwalk. The third-party co-founder adds genuine scientific credibility that distinguishes this post from the brand's unattributed statistics elsewhere.

The ideological logic underpinning all five Stella McCartney posts within this theme is consistent. In each case, nature functions as the raw material for a technological process rather than as the source of a practice. Cellulose becomes Sequinova through a bioreactor. Fishing nets become regenerated nylon through an industrial process. Fungi become mycelium leather through biotechnology. This is the relationship to nature that Patara and Nayak (2025) identify as characteristic of Western sustainability solutionism: nature as resource to be drawn upon, processed, and returned to the market as innovation. It is worth noting that these are genuinely innovative materials doing real work to address documented harms. The critique centers on worldview: framing nature as raw stock for laboratory improvement reflects a distinct Western bias, passing itself off as the only way forward.

6.7.2 FabIndia: Nature as teacher

FabIndia's single post within this theme ‘the Suraiya Hasan Bose’ archival carousel. Published on 8 October 2025, the same date as the FEVVERS reel presents an entirely different relationship between nature and sustainability knowledge. Bose spent her life working with natural dyes derived from jaggery, indigo plants, flowers, and tree bark, reconstructing thread counts, and reviving the himru weave tradition in Andhra Pradesh. Her knowledge isn’t produced in a laboratory, it was accumulated through decades of engagement with land, plant, and community.

The caption quote - 'She knew every leaf on that land and would have been aware of the loss of even one flower if someone had plucked it', positions ecological knowledge as

inseparable from craft knowledge. The sustainability is not in the product of her work but in the mode of attention her work required: a quality of relationship with the natural world that no bioreactor can replicate and no material innovation can substitute. This is what Patara and Nayak (2025) mean when they argue that the knowledge systems marginalised by colonial and Eurocentric frameworks are not primitive precursors to modern sustainability - they are sophisticated, tested, and ecologically embedded practices that Western sustainability discourse has consistently failed to recognise as such (Mignolo, 2007; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025).

6.7.3 The October 8 juxtaposition: Innovation versus inheritance

The FEVVERS reel (see Post 11), published 8 October 2025 is Stella McCartney's most visually concentrated example of the fashion solutionism register. The reel shows atelier hands needle-working plant-based feather material, with captions describing the brand's process of engineering cruelty-free alternatives to traditional feathers. This post is analytically significant for a specific reason: it puts craft, skilled handwork, material precision, and atelier production, front and centre. Yet here the craft comes from a branded atelier whose job is product development for a luxury market, not from an artisan community with a named cultural tradition. The hands look just as visible as in FabIndia's artisan posts, but their relationship to the brand that employs them is quite different (Patara & Nayak, 2025).

This distinction matters because it illustrates the precise mechanism through which convenient recognition operates within Western sustainability communication. When craft is made visible as the handwork of an unnamed atelier rather than as the knowledge of a named cultural community, it becomes available for appropriation by the brand's innovation narrative. The hands are visible, but the tradition behind them is not. That is not incidental. It is why FEVVERS reads as a sustainability story about Stella McCartney, rather than about the craft knowledge that makes the innovation materially possible in the first place.

The juxtaposition with FabIndia's Suraiya Hasan Bose post, published on the same date of 8 October 2025, carries particular analytical weight for this study's cross-cultural examination. FEVVERS is a plant-based feather alternative, marketed as the world's first,

developed by a UK-based start-up and debuted on Stella McCartney's runway as a cruelty-free substitute for animal plumage. Stella McCartney's own documentation describes of the FEVVERS plant-based feather alternative as applied by hand by Chanakya International, a Mumbai-based embroidery house carrying thirteen generations of Indian artisanal knowledge (Stella McCartney, 2025). Yet the sustainability narrative belongs entirely to the innovation. Chanakya's craft functions here as the technical means, while FEVVERS carries the brand's narrative. Once again, Indian knowledge shows up where the work is done but not where the credit goes (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Mignolo, 2007; Spivak, 1988).

The FEVVERS innovation also illustrates fashion solutionism at its most sophisticated. The brand's own documentation notes that over one billion birds are killed annually for feathers, that birds are frequently plucked alive, and that South Africa's ostrich industry alone emits over 62,000 tonnes of carbon equivalent emissions annually (Stella McCartney, 2025). These are real harms, and FEVVERS addresses them materially. Yet the solution offered is entirely product-facing: a new material replaces an old one, the runway collection continues, and the structural logic of luxury fashion production remains undisturbed. What is left out is whose labour actually makes the innovation possible, under what conditions, and whether thirteen generations of Chanakya artisanship counts as sustainability knowledge in its own right, rather than simply serving as material for a Western brand's innovation story (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025).

Both posts invoke nature as the source of sustainability knowledge, show hands working with material, and claim a form of craft authenticity, yet the substance of that claim differs considerably: one shows hands working with a laboratory-developed plant-based protein in a London atelier, while the other shows a woman who spent sixty years learning to read the ecology of Andhra Pradesh through the fibres it produced. The distance between those two positions is the distance between fashion solutionism and craft wisdom, and it is, this study argues, the distance between two fundamentally different cultural ideologies about what sustainability is, where it comes from, and who has always held that knowledge (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Khurana, 2022).

6.7.4 FabIndia as the Indo-Western Bridge: The Fabels launch

The December 2025 launch of Fabels - a new FabIndia sub-brand explicitly designed to occupy the space between artisanal roots and modern global silhouettes is the most strategically significant development in the entire FabIndia dataset for understanding where craft-based sustainability is heading.

The Fabels launch carousel (5 December 2025) carries the positioning statement: 'blends the eye of a global traveller with the grounding of an Indian soul / creating pieces shaped by craft, contemporary clarity, and an ease that speaks of quiet luxury.' This is FabIndia consciously translating craft heritage into Western luxury language - 'quiet luxury*,' currently one of the dominant aesthetic frameworks in Western fashion discourse whilst retaining the craft authenticity that differentiates it from conventional luxury brands. FabIndia positions Indian craft as something that seamlessly enriches modern Western living, treating the two worlds as natural partners rather than opposing styles.

In Mignolo's (2007) terms, this is not assimilation into Western sustainability discourse but a form of epistemic agency; FabIndia entering global luxury markets on terms shaped by its own knowledge tradition rather than by the frameworks that have historically erased it. An audience comment on the Fabels launch post captures the positioning directly: 'Loving how Fabels captures the spirit of modern wanderers while staying anchored in Indian craftsmanship. A blend that feels both global and deeply personal' (@jlinumco). This comment reads less like a description of a product than an articulation of a cross-cultural positioning. Fabels appears to be entering Western lifestyle markets on FabIndia's own cultural terms rather than on Western sustainability discourse's terms. Whether this represents a durable ideological position or a commercial accommodation that will gradually absorb the solutionist logic it currently resists cannot be settled with the data available here; it would need persistent tracking beyond this study's scope.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Context

Where Chapter 6 presented and analysed the findings theme by theme, this chapter draws those findings into direct conversation with the research questions and the theoretical framework established in the literature review. Rather than interpreting individual posts, it synthesises findings across themes, identifies the deeper structural and ideological patterns that the data collectively reveal, and situates these patterns within the broader scholarly debate on sustainable fashion communication.

Table 9: Summary of findings by research question

Dimension	FabIndia	Stella McCartney
Mode of Expression	Implicit	Explicit
Medium	Culture and community	Market and product
Focus	Practice and continuity	Innovation and identity
Visibility of Sustainability	Embedded	Declared
Ideological Framework	Craft wisdom	Fashion solutionism
Audience Relationship	Belonging	Aspiration

The table illustrates a clear ideological divergence, with FabIndia grounding sustainability in implicit cultural practice, while Stella McCartney constructs it as an explicit, innovation-driven market identity.

7.2 Answering the research questions

RQ1: How is Sustainability Defined and Expressed?

The dominant literature on sustainability communication has been built around measuring and optimising how brands disclose, certify, and signal sustainability (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Henninger et al., 2016; Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024). These frameworks share a structural assumption: that sustainability becomes legible when it

announces itself through language, labels, and claims. This study's findings challenge that assumption.

The most emotionally resonant and enduring expressions of sustainability in this dataset do not announce themselves at all. FabIndia's posts make no explicit sustainability claims, carry no certification signals, and use no environmental vocabulary. And yet they demonstrate what this study terms ambient sustainability, embedded in practice, inherited across generations, and communicated through repetition rather than declaration. FabIndia does not perform sustainability, because it has always been practised (Khurana, 2022; Maheshwari et al., 2025; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025).

Stella McCartney operates differently. Sustainability here is a consciously constructed position: articulated, signalled, and addressed to an audience that is invited to recognise and endorse it. This is performed sustainability that requires an audience and asks to be seen.

Neither mode is inherently inferior. But they are not equivalent, and treating them within the same communicative framework produces a structural blind spot. As this study's data suggests, the frameworks currently used to evaluate sustainability communication including greenwashing detection, certification audits, and disclosure analysis are structurally better equipped to evaluate the performance of sustainability than its practice (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024; Kolotouchkina et al., 2025). What does not announce itself cannot be meaningfully captured by tools designed to listen for announcements.

This extends Lyon and Montgomery's (2015) selective disclosure framework beyond its original Western brand communication context. The gap between what is communicated and what is practised is not always the result of deliberate concealment; it can also be a structural consequence of measurement systems that cannot see what is not disclosed. It provides an empirical illustration of Patara and Nayak's (2025) argument that non-western sustainability practices are rendered structurally illegible within dominant frameworks (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Mignolo, 2007). It raises a question the existing literature has not yet fully addressed: whether frameworks designed to evaluate sustainability communication are capable of recognising forms of sustainability that do not operate through announcement, certification, or disclosure at all.

RQ2: What Ideologies Underpin These Narratives?

The literature has extensively theorised the ideological divergence between Western and non-Western sustainability frameworks: Mignolo's (2007) coloniality, Patara and Nayak's (2025) Eurocentric erasure, Carranza et al.'s (2023) collectivist versus individualist cultural logics. What it has perhaps not yet fully confronted is that labelling these differences as cultural, geographical, or individual may itself be part of the problem. Because what we are dealing with is not a local issue. It is global. And it is high time we questioned whether the frameworks we have inherited to decipher it are adequate to the task.

Despite decades of cross-cultural analysis, we still encounter the same patterns, the same failures, the same loopholes, the same forms of harm (Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024; Fashion Revolution, 2024) characterised by an inability to escape the very structures that produced them. The differences we have so carefully mapped have not helped us. If anything, they may have inadvertently deepened the constraints.

This study does not set out merely to compare cultures. It moves closer to the root and asks something more unsettling: does cultural difference really matter when the problem itself is so vast, so material, that it does not recognise those boundaries? The environmental crisis born of industrial pollution, the poverty of artisans, the manufacturing of synthetic fibres (Bildirici et al., 2025; Majumdar et al., 2020; Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2022) do not speak English or Hindi. They do not distinguish between the luxury consumer and the craft artisan, between the Western framework and the Gandhian one. These are real issues, felt in real bodies, on real land, in real communities. They simply are, and they are happening to everyone, regardless of the labels we have placed on our differences.

FabIndia speaks through community and craft. Stella McCartney speaks through celebrity and innovation. Both are constructing meaning through frameworks, one grounded in cultural inheritance, the other in individual aspiration. But the wicked problems the world is attempting to confront (Rittel & Webber, 1973) environmental collapse, social inequality, economic exploitation, political paralysis do not sit within either framework. They exceed both. And perhaps that is precisely why, despite decades of sustainability communication from both traditions, the harm continues. We may be mis conceptualising the very thing we are trying to solve.

And yet, even here, the picture is not straightforward.

FabIndia appears to speak closer to sustainability as a lived practice, grounded in histories of craft, continuity, and community, a tradition that predates Western sustainability discourse entirely. The L.C. Jain centenary carousel traces this lineage back to Gandhi's swadeshi* movement of the 1920s: a political philosophy rooted in self-sufficiency, local production, and ethical restraint, existing over sixty years before the Brundtland Commission formalised sustainable development in 1987 (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). And yet, when sustainability is officially defined, these practices disappear. Not because they were absent, but because they were never made legible within that framework. Craft, indigenous knowledge, and lived systems of low-impact production are not rejected outright; they are simply not counted (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025; Mignolo, 2007). That absence does not sit neutrally. It is, perhaps, inevitable, the consequence of approaching the unfamiliar through a vocabulary unprepared to recognise it.

What is lost here does not vanish; it remains, but buried. Folded beneath layers of soft storytelling, aesthetic appeal, and carefully constructed narratives of heritage—across both brands, in different ways, for different audiences. The practice continues, but its political and ecological significance is subdued, translated into something more palatable, more marketable, less disruptive (Mignolo, 2007; Sandhu, 2020). The knowledge is still there. But it is described in a language that cannot hold its full weight.

And on these same grounds, we do not see India necessarily moving toward doing things differently. Instead, we begin to see how coloniality reproduces itself through internalisation, drawing on Mignolo's (2007 ; Spivak, 1988) framework where ways of knowing that already exist are compelled to conform to externally defined frameworks of legitimacy. India is not lacking a model of sustainability. It already knows one. But it is influenced perhaps constrained to recognise itself through a vocabulary of development that was never built to see it. Over time, what is buried does not simply remain hidden; it risks losing its meaning altogether, absorbed under the weight of imposed terminology and reshaped through definitions that cannot hold its original form. The consequences of this are material, ecological, and deeply human.

What we are left with, then, is the distortion of sustainability language and it's form. A system that once existed as a complete way of living as economic, social, ecological is

today reframed as a narrative. a story. As something that must now be explained, translated, and validated, but recognised on its own terms. A liberal tolerance for craft as heritage, rather than a grounded recognition of craft as knowledge.

What this study quietly points towards is something neither brand, nor much of the existing literature, has yet been willing to say: that sustainability cannot be communicated through culture alone, nor through innovation, or any single constructed identity as individual or collective. For the first time in human history, we are dealing with problems that demand us to see beyond the labelled: not Western, not Eastern; not luxury, not craft; not a marketing position, not a cultural inheritance. Simply, what is already available to everyone, before these layers of meaning were applied.

7.3 Addressing conceptual instability of sustainable narratives

The literature identifies sustainability as conceptually unstable and inconsistently defined as a floating signifier in Barthes' (1957/1984) terms, whose semantic openness renders it available for capture by competing interests (Hall, 1997; Henninger et al., 2016; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). The findings of this study confirm this instability and provide an empirical illustration of its consequences. Rather than converging toward a shared definition, the two datasets reveal parallel but incompatible constructions: sustainability as lived cultural practice is inherited, embedded in daily ritual, material choice, and intergenerational knowledge*, existing prior to and independently of its formal naming (Khurana, 2022; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025); and sustainability as communicative claim, constructed for an audience and requiring language, platform visibility, and institutional recognition to function (Testa et al., 2021; Kolotouchkina et al., 2025).

This study finds that these two constructions are not describing the same thing, a finding consistent with Patara and Nayak's (2025) argument that Western and non-Western sustainability frameworks rest on fundamentally different epistemological assumptions. Yet the more significant insight, as RQ2 makes clear, may not lie in their divergence but in what both constructions share: neither, in its current form, makes labour conditions and supply chain accountability visible to the audiences it reaches (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Maheshwari et al., 2025).

FabIndia's ambient sustainability communicates cultural belonging and craft heritage but leaves artisan equity arrangements and labour conditions outside the frame (Maheshwari et al., 2025; Patara & Nayak, 2025). Stella McCartney's performed sustainability communicates animal welfare and material innovation but leaves garment worker conditions and supply chain transparency similarly unaddressed (Huggard & Choudhary, 2025; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). Two brands, operating through structurally different sustainability modes, arrive at the same omission. That convergence, this study argues, is not coincidental; it is the condition that convenient recognition produces: both brands communicate sustainability in the register most likely to generate audience endorsement—cultural authenticity in one case, ethical innovation in the other—while the dimensions of sustainability that carry the greatest structural risk, namely labour and supply chain accountability, remain outside what either audience is invited to see (Mignolo, 2007; Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024; Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2022).

The divergence between ambient and performed sustainability has direct empirical consequences for what is recognised as sustainable within global fashion systems. As Entman's (1993) framing theory predicts, the dominant frameworks through which sustainability is currently defined and measured: explicit claims, material certifications, quantified disclosures, and innovation narratives are structurally better equipped to evaluate Stella McCartney's form of sustainability than FabIndia's. Consider what FabIndia's dataset actually contains: an ochre silk kurta passed between generations at Gurpurab; Chikankari embroidery traced through specific quarters of Lucknow; festival content that treats natural fibre as cultural continuity rather than ethical innovation. None of these carry a sustainability certification. None would register in a standard brand sustainability audit (Fashion Revolution, 2024; Kolotouchkina et al., 2025).

Yet this study's analysis suggests they may embody sustainable practice more comprehensively, and more durably, than communication strategies that announce sustainability without structurally enacting it (Khurana, 2022; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025). A brand that certifies nothing, discloses nothing, and claims nothing in the formal language of sustainability may nonetheless be practising it more comprehensively than a brand that does all three. This is not a minor observation about communication style; it is a structural consequence of applying Western-derived sustainability frameworks to non-Western practices that were never designed to be legible within those categories (Mignolo,

2007; Patara & Nayak, 2025). The measurement instrument is not neutral. It carries the assumptions of the culture that built it.

7.4 Reframing of attitude-behaviour gap of the consumers as communication problem

The literature positions the attitude–behaviour gap as a consumer-level inconsistency: the failure of ethical values to translate into purchasing behaviour (James and Bardey, 2025; Dabas and Whang, 2022). The findings of this study suggest that this gap may be structurally reproduced within sustainability communication itself, rather than located solely at the level of individual behaviour (Henninger et al., 2016; Upadhyay & Kamble, 2025). Explicit sustainability messaging consistently appears to generate lower engagement than culturally embedded or celebrity-driven content, a pattern recurring across both datasets (Testa et al., 2021; Kolotouchkina et al., 2025). FabIndia's World Environment Day post (Post 9), its most overtly environmental communication, received just 97 likes, marking the lowest engagement in the dataset. Similarly, Stella McCartney's Earth Day SOS capsule, one of its most substantively ethical campaigns, attracted 1,066 likes, in contrast to 26,500 likes on a celebrity-led campaign featuring Selena Gomez published within the same month. The gap may therefore not be simply between what consumers value and what they do, but between how sustainability is communicated and how it becomes socially and culturally meaningful to the audiences it attempts to reach (Carranza et al., 2023; Testa et al., 2021).

As outlined in the introduction of this study, sustainability narratives operate through a form of constructed ambiguity: engaging audiences without offering resolution (Henninger et al., 2016; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). The findings suggest that this instability is not merely coincidental to the attitude–behaviour gap; rather, it may constitute one of its underlying structural conditions (Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024).

This connects directly to what the literature identifies as the structurally produced nature of the attitude–behaviour gap (James and Bardey, 2025; Henninger et al., 2016; Dabas and Whang, 2022). Consumers are not indifferent; they are navigating a marketplace saturated with contradictory, unverifiable, and culturally misaligned claims (Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024; Kolotouchkina et al., 2025). What this study tentatively adds is that this

confusion may not be accidental. The rotating sustainability frames, the unattributed statistics, and the celebrity affect that consistently outperforms environmental substance are not simply communication failures; they are, as Lyon and Montgomery (2015) warn, conditions that actively incentivise further distortion rather than resolution. The gap, this study suggests, may not be waiting to be closed so much as being structurally maintained by the commercial conditions that produce it (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024; Kolotouchkina et al., 2025).

7.5 Cross-cultural understanding of sustainability as communication

A key pattern emerging across the data is that explicit sustainability communication appears to underperform in engagement terms—not necessarily because of a lack of relevance, but possibly because of a mismatch between the register of the communication and the meaning systems through which different audiences engage with sustainability (Testa et al., 2021; Kolotouchkina et al., 2025). Sustainability appears to resonate in FabIndia's context through cultural belonging, and in Stella McCartney's context through identity and aspiration. When it is presented as statistics or institutional information, engagement data suggests it reaches fewer people than when it is conveyed through identity or cultural recognition (Carranza et al., 2023; Dabas and Whang, 2022). This may help explain why sustainability often remains discursive rather than actionable (Henninger et al., 2016; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015), a pattern consistent with Carranza et al.'s (2023) finding that sustainability operates through fundamentally different psychological and structural mechanisms across Western and non-Western contexts.

This dynamic also illuminates a pattern in the data: the brand whose sustainability is most culturally embedded reaches fewer people when it communicates explicitly about sustainability, while the brand whose sustainability is more commercially constructed reaches substantially larger audiences when it deploys crisis imagery and celebrity association (Testa et al., 2021; Al-Issa, 2024). As Barthes (1957/1984) argued, the meanings attached to concepts are not fixed, but remain constantly available for capture and recapture by competing interests. Sustainability, this study tentatively suggests, may be at risk of precisely this kind of displacement within fashion brand communication—

not because the environmental crisis it names is temporary, but because the commercial system that has captured its language has a structural interest in keeping it emotionally resonant rather than structurally accountable (Entman, 1993; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024).

7.6 Belonging and aspiration: Two ideological relationships with sustainability

The data reveals two structurally different relationships between audiences and sustainability. Not merely two communication styles, but two ideological frameworks through which sustainability is made meaningful or rendered commercially complicit.

Aspiration, as the literature identifies, does not reliably drive structural change; it tends instead to drive consumption (Carranza et al., 2023; Dabas and Whang, 2022). Stella McCartney's sustainability is communicated to an audience invited to become more ethical through purchasing: a mode that generates unrealistic expectations of what individual consumer choice can achieve, while leaving the structural conditions of production unaddressed (James and Bardey, 2025; Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2022; Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020). Furthermore, sustainability framed as aspiration is structurally accessible only to those who can afford premium ethical products, quietly rendering those who cannot both invisible within the sustainability narrative and implicitly responsible for their own non-participation. This is not an incidental feature of aspirational sustainability communication; it is, as James and Bardey (2025) and Dabas and Whang (2022) suggest, a structural consequence of a model in which ethical consumption is positioned as an individual lifestyle rather than collective structural change.

Belonging-based sustainability, as the FabIndia data suggests, carries its own risks. In a politically polarised context such as contemporary India, cultural identity is not a neutral anchor: festival, craft, and community have been systematically mobilised as political currency (Sandhu, 2020; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025), and a brand whose sustainability identity is built around cultural belonging to a specific Indian community may therefore be more vulnerable to political co-option than its content suggests (Mignolo, 2007). The FabIndia belonging narrative does not exist outside this landscape; it exists within it, and the analytical question this study raises, without being able to resolve it within its scope—

is whether belonging-based sustainability communication can remain culturally authentic within a commercially and politically contested terrain (Mignolo, 2007; Spivak, 1988).

Both modes are therefore susceptible to appropriation by interests with no structural commitment to the change they claim to support. What the data collectively suggests is that neither aspiration nor belonging, in their current communicative forms, appears oriented toward the structural accountability that a genuinely transformative sustainable fashion system would require. In both cases, the audience is offered emotional participation rather than the informational clarity that structural accountability demands (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Henninger et al., 2016; Testa et al., 2021). This is not a claim about what audiences consciously experience; it is an inference drawn from the structure of the communication itself, supported by the existing literature on green identity and aspirational consumption (Carranza et al., 2023; Dabas and Whang, 2022; Al-Issa, 2024).

7.7 Convenient recognition and capital manipulation: sustainability's most dangerous partnership

If performed and ambient sustainability describe how sustainability is communicated, convenient recognition and capital manipulation describe the structural conditions that determine what is communicated and what is not.

The two concepts operate together. Capital manipulation, defined in this study as the selective mobilisation of environmental and ethical concern as a vehicle for commercial gain, does not operate in isolation. It requires a structural filter that determines which sustainability claims are legitimised and which are rendered invisible. That filter is convenient recognition: the tendency of dominant sustainability frameworks to recognise only the forms of sustainability they find commercially or institutionally useful, at every level of the supply chain, from raw material cultivation and animal farming to artisan workshops and celebrity runway shows (Mignolo, 2007; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2022; Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020). Together, they form a self-reinforcing system: capital manipulation selectively mobilises sustainability as a commercial resource, and convenient recognition legitimises what has been selected while rendering invisible what has not. Neither mechanism is accountable to the audiences who

absorb the consequences of the communication landscape they jointly produce.

What this study finds is that neither concept is confined to one mode of sustainability communication. They are as present in ambient sustainability as in performed sustainability. FabIndia's craft heritage narrative passes through the same filter as Stella McCartney's material innovation claims; the difference lies only in which aspects of each are made visible and which are rendered conveniently invisible. The artisan's labour conditions, the equity structures, and the political vulnerability of belonging-based sustainability do not pass through this filter. What does pass through is what capital finds commercially useful: the aesthetic, the culturally authentic, and the aspirationally legible (Patara & Nayak, 2025; Maheshwari et al., 2025; Al-Issa, 2024).

The consequence for audiences is a sustainability communication landscape in which the informational clarity necessary for meaningful ethical decision-making is structurally absent. This is not a claim about individual consumer cognition; this study has not conducted audience research and therefore cannot determine what any individual understood or concluded from the content analysed. It is an observation about the structure of the communication itself: across both datasets, the posts with the highest audience engagement are those in which sustainability is embedded in spectacle, identity, or cultural narrative, rather than presented as verifiable environmental information (Testa et al., 2021; Kolotouchkina et al., 2025; Carranza et al., 2023). As Lyon and Montgomery (2015) argue, this structural condition does not primarily result from individual bad faith; it is produced by an incentive system in which emotional resonance is rewarded and structural disclosure is not. The result is a communication landscape that does not equip audiences to evaluate sustainability claims accurately, not because audiences are disengaged, but because the system is not structured to provide the information that genuine evaluation would require (Henninger et al., 2016; Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024).

Addressing the mutually reinforcing relationship between capital manipulation and convenient recognition requires intervention not at the surface of sustainability communication, but at its structural roots: in the certification frameworks that decide what counts as sustainable, the institutional bodies that validate what qualifies, and the power structures that determine whose sustainability is recognised and whose remains, in convenient recognition’s terms, unseen (GOTS, 2023; United Nations, 2015; Fashion Revolution, 2024; Mignolo, 2007; Patara & Nayak, 2025). Without changes at that

structural level, improvements in brand communication are likely to remain improvements in the performance of sustainability rather than in its practice.

7.8 Connecting to the broader literature

The findings of this study both confirm and extend the existing literature in several significant ways. The confirmation of Henninger et al.'s (2016) empty vessel argument is perhaps the most consistent finding across the Stella McCartney dataset. Across 36 posts and twelve months, sustainability functions precisely as Henninger et al. describe: as a form of language that can be filled with whatever meaning serves the commercial purpose at any given moment (Henninger et al., 2016; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Barthes, 1957/1984). The rotating sustainability frames strategy identified in Theme 3 is the most structurally complete expression of this argument within the data (Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024).

The findings also offer a tentative extension of Huggard and Choudhary's (2025) fashion solutionism argument into territory the original formulation may not have envisaged. The Nasabia/TANORA post demonstrates that solutionism does not only erase craft wisdom; it can also colonise it, extracting its authenticity as a sustainability credential while leaving its structural conditions unchanged (Mignolo, 2007; Spivak, 1988; Sandhu, 2020). The study further complicates existing frameworks by showing that the boundary between Western and non-Western sustainability orientations may not be fixed. FabIndia's launch of Fabels demonstrates that craft-based sustainability models are actively moving toward Western lifestyle markets on their own cultural terms, rather than on those of Western sustainability discourse. The Fabels launch offers one early and tentative signal of this possibility, though whether it represents a genuine ideological shift or a form of commercial accommodation remains, at this stage, an open question.

7.9 Contributions of this study

This study makes four contributions to the field. First, it introduces ambient and performed sustainability as an analytical framework for examining sustainability communication across cultural contexts. To the author's knowledge, this specific distinction has not been

formally named or applied as a cross-cultural analytical tool within the existing literature on sustainable fashion communication, though the practices it describes have been documented by scholars including Khurana (2022), Huggard and Choudhary (2025), and Patara and Nayak (2025), without being formalised as a conceptual category. The contribution of this study is therefore the naming, formalisation, and cross-cultural application of a distinction that the existing literature has approached but not systematised (Entman, 1993; Khurana, 2022; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025).

Second, this study extends the existing literature on the attitude–behaviour gap (James and Bardey, 2025; Henninger et al., 2016) by proposing that a parallel gap may operate at the level of sustainability communication itself—not only in the distance between what consumers say they value and what they purchase, but in the distance between what brands communicate as sustainability and what they structurally practise. The mechanism proposed is affective purchasing, defined here as the process through which sustainability is translated by brand communication into identity, aspiration, and emotional resonance rather than structural information. This builds on existing scholarship on emotional engagement and green identity (Dabas and Whang, 2022), extending it into the communicative dimension of the gap. This is consistent with the selective disclosure literature (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Alizadeh and Liscio, 2024), and the contribution of this study is to apply that framework cross-culturally and connect it explicitly to the platform logic of Instagram—a specific communicative context that the selective disclosure literature has not yet addressed in systematic comparative terms (Testa et al., 2021; Kolotouchkina et al., 2025). This remains a tentative proposition; richer longitudinal data and audience research would be needed to confirm it.

Third, this study provides empirical cross-cultural evidence for a theoretical argument already well established in the decolonial and postcolonial literature: that non-Western sustainability practices operate within a structurally different epistemological framework from Western sustainability discourse, one that Western-derived metrics are not equipped to recognise or evaluate (Mignolo, 2007; Spivak, 1988; Patara & Nayak, 2025). This study makes no claim to originality with respect to the theoretical argument itself; these scholars have developed it more extensively and more rigorously than this study could. The contribution here is empirical and contextually specific: through systematic cross-cultural comparative analysis of Instagram brand communication published in 2025, this study provides a documented, data-grounded illustration of how these theoretical dynamics

operate within contemporary fashion sustainability communication—a specific evidentiary contribution that the existing literature has not yet produced.

Fourth, this study introduces capital manipulation and convenient recognition as a paired analytical framework for understanding the structural conditions that determine what sustainability is communicated and what is not. Capital manipulation describes the selective mobilisation of environmental and ethical concern as a vehicle for commercial gain; convenient recognition describes the tendency of dominant sustainability frameworks to legitimise only the forms of sustainability they find commercially or institutionally useful. Together, they identify a self-reinforcing system that operates across both Western and non-Western sustainability communication contexts — a structural pairing that, to the author's knowledge, has not been formally named or applied within the existing literature on sustainable fashion communication.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Summary

The central finding is that sustainable fashion operates as two distinct and ideologically incompatible constructions. For Stella McCartney, sustainability is a communicative performance: announced, certified, celebrity-endorsed, and calibrated for consumer aspiration within the logics of Western fashion solutionism. For FabIndia, sustainability is a cultural continuity: embedded in craft heritage, intergenerational practice, and community belonging, present long before it acquired its current name and market value. This study terms these two modes performed sustainability and ambient sustainability and argues that the distinction is not merely descriptive but politically significant, because the global frameworks through which sustainability is currently measured and recognised are structured to see only the former (Mignolo, 2007; Patara & Nayak, 2025).

The engagement data reveals a further irony: the brand whose sustainability is most culturally embedded reaches the fewest people when it speaks in the explicit language of sustainability. The brand whose sustainability is most commercially constructed reaches the most. This is not a failure of authenticity; it is a structural feature of platform communication, in which affective purchasing, the conversion of ethical concern into identity and aspiration, consistently outperforms substantive environmental argument (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Dabas and Whang, 2022).

Both brands share a significant silence on labour accountability. Neither supply chain transparency nor worker welfare appears substantively in either brand's 2025 content, confirming that consumer-facing sustainability narratives remain structurally disconnected from the conditions of production (Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2022; Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020; Fashion Revolution, 2024). This is the unresolved tension at the centre of the field, and it is, this study argues, the most important question sustainable fashion communication has yet to answer.

The study's four original contributions: the performed/ambient sustainability distinction, the

reframing of the attitude–behaviour gap as a communicative rather than merely behavioural problem, the empirical challenge to Eurocentric sustainability frameworks, and the identification of capital manipulation and convenient recognition as structurally reinforcing mechanisms within sustainability communication are offered as openings.

What this research ultimately asks is whether the global frameworks through which sustainability is defined and recognised can see the knowledge systems they have historically erased. The answer, as this study demonstrates, is that they are not yet. Whether they become so is not a question for scholarship alone. It is a question about whose knowledge, whose labour, and whose ways of living with the material world are accorded legitimacy within the structures that govern the future of fashion.

8.2 Limitations

This study has four honest limitations worth naming. First, the artisans: the people whose knowledge and labour sit at the very centre of this argument, never speak here. Their practice is analysed, their craft is celebrated, their erasure is critiqued. But their voice is absent. That is not just a methodological gap. It is, uncomfortably, the same erasure this dissertation set out to challenge and one that participatory research designs (Sandhu, 2020; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025) would be better equipped to address.

Second, 72 posts is a window, not a full view. A brand's sustainability identity is built across years, not months. One year of Instagram content tells us something important but it cannot tell us everything.

Third, likes are not beliefs: this study knows what people engaged with. It does not know what they thought, felt, or did afterwards. The distance between a like and a behaviour change is precisely what this research is about and yet it remains, here, unmeasured.

Fourth, the researcher is not neutral. This study has a perspective, and that perspective shaped what it found. That is not a weakness to hide. It is something to name honestly and to invite future researchers to complicate.

Overall, this study is delimited to Instagram content published in 2025 by two brand-managed accounts. It does not examine consumer reception, other social media platforms, or the verified supply chain practices of either brand. The analysis focuses on what is communicated,

not on what is materially enacted behind the communication. These boundaries are not incidental: they reflect the study's specific contribution, which is to examine how sustainability is constructed and circulated through brand communication rather than to evaluate the brands' environmental performance directly.

8.3 Future Research

The most urgent direction future research could take is the simplest: give the artisans a microphone. Not research about them, research with them. In their own language, on their own terms, documenting what they already know about making sustainably. Future research employing participatory or co-designed methodologies: community-based research, oral history, collaborative documentation, would begin reversing that erasure (Sandhu, 2020; Huggard & Choudhary, 2025). Spivak (1988) asked whether the subaltern can speak but the more pressing question for this field may be whether we have yet created the conditions in which they are genuinely heard. This study analysed their erasure. Future research should begin reversing it, recovering what has been historically erased rather than inventing what already exists.

Second, longitudinal audience research. This study documents what audiences engaged with, but not what they did as a result. Research that tracks the relationship between Instagram engagement and downstream behaviour change would begin to address whether the patterns identified here have real consequences beyond the like count (Dabas and Whang, 2022; Upadhyay & Kamble, 2025) but cannot resolve whether sustainability communication on digital platforms produces any meaningful shift at all, or simply produces more content.

Third, longitudinal brand analysis. The launch of FabIndia's Fabels sub-brand is one of the most consequential early signals in this dataset: craft-based sustainability entering Western luxury markets on its own cultural terms. Whether this positioning is sustained as commercial pressures intensify, or whether it gradually accommodates the solutionist logic it currently resists, is a question that only time and continued research can answer.

Fourth, platform algorithmic analysis. This study found consistent engagement patterns in which spectacle, celebrity, and crisis imagery outperformed substantive environmental content. Future research should examine not only what brands choose to post but what the platform's algorithmic logic rewards (Testa et al., 2021; Kolotouchkina et al., 2025) and

whether that logic is itself a structural barrier to effective sustainability communication.

Fifth, policy and certification framework analysis. This study raises questions about whose sustainability is rendered legible within existing certification and disclosure frameworks. Research that examines the design assumptions embedded within bodies such as GOTS, the UN SDGs, and Fashion Revolution's Transparency Index and whether those assumptions systematically disadvantage non-Western sustainability practices would extend the decolonial argument this study raises empirically (GOTS, 2023; United Nations, 2015; Fashion Revolution, 2024; Mignolo, 2007).

8.4 Epilogue

This dissertation ends, but the conversation it hopes to start does not. What began as an academic inquiry into two brands and their Instagram content became something far more personal for me: a confrontation with the structures that have sold us artificial sustainability narratives for so long that we have forgotten how to see without them. We have travelled so far down the road of misguidance that the lens through which we now see sustainability: minimal, animal-free, certified, cultural - is not our own. It was handed to us, carefully constructed, commercially sustained, and mistaken for truth. I did not expect this research to shake something loose in me. It did. If this work finds any life beyond these pages, I hope it reaches research scholars willing to ask harder questions, policy makers willing to look beyond certification and campaign, and individuals willing to sit with the discomfort of recognising that the communities with the deepest, most honest relationship with sustainability are rarely the ones being listened to. Marginalised economies do not lack knowledge of how to live sustainably. They have practised it for centuries. What they lack is an audience willing to set aside its superiority long enough to learn. Sustainability will not be saved by the next material innovation or the next celebrity campaign. It will be saved, if it is saved at all, by the willingness to recognise that the answers we are searching for have always already existed in the hands of artisans, in nature-friendly practices, in the rhythms of craft communities, in the knowledge systems that survived Eurocentric views not because they were permitted to, but because they were too alive to be fully erased. I hope this research becomes a small part of that recognition. And I hope it is only the beginning.

“Sustainability is not a concept on a page, but a pulse within a living being. Made of nature, by nature, for nature. To kill it is to erase no mere line of trade. It is to pull the mirror from our own eyes and vanish into the quiet dust.”

— Rupal Teotia

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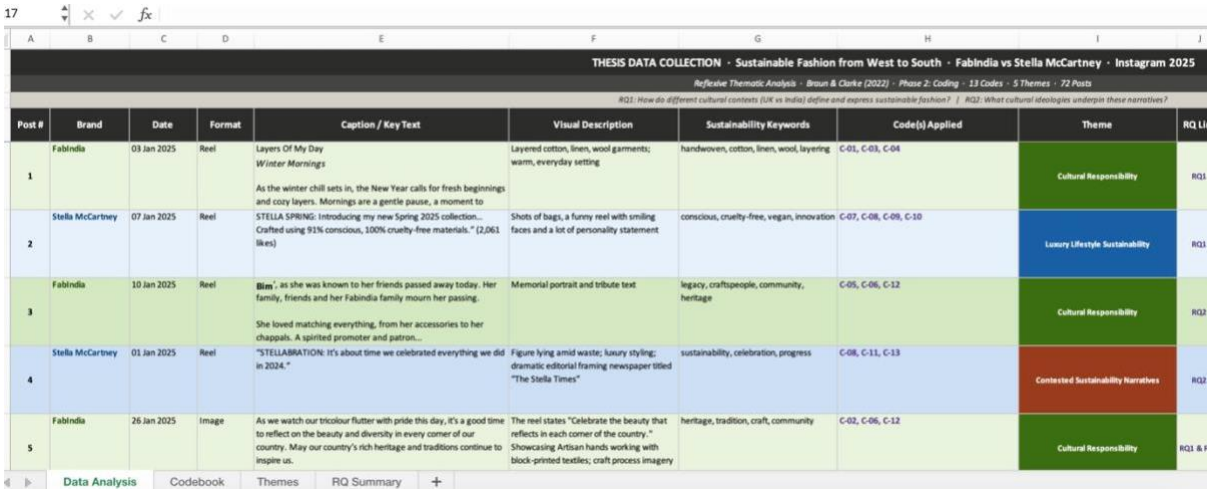
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Appendix A

Jan, 2025. Data Analysis Sample Screenshot — January 2025.



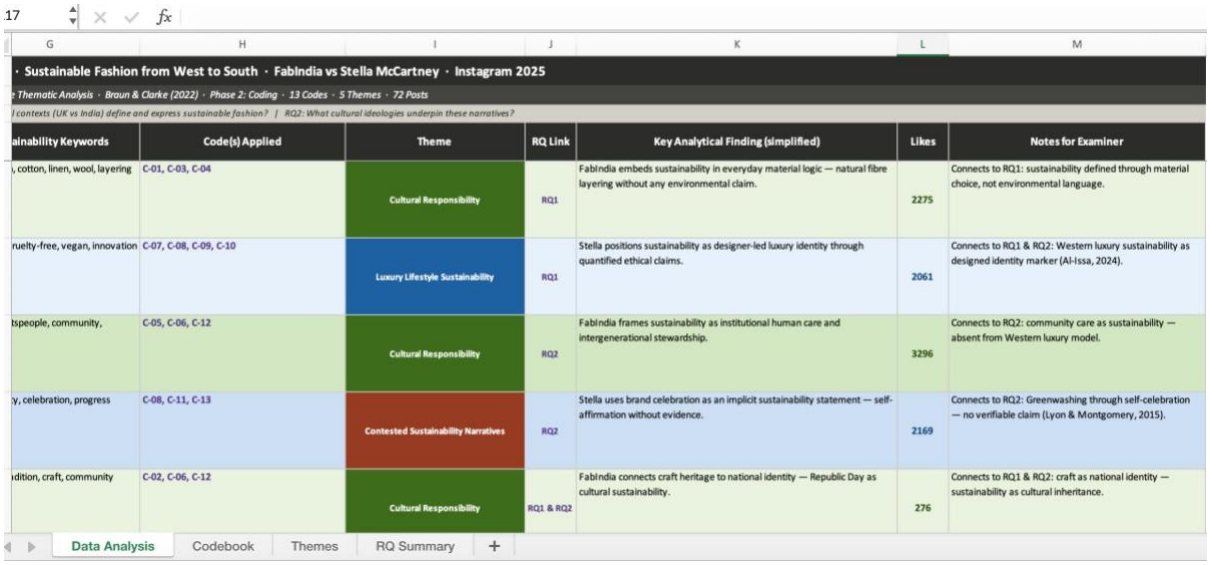
THESIS DATA COLLECTION · Sustainable Fashion from West to South · FabIndia vs Stella McCartney · Instagram 2025

Reflexive Thematic Analysis · Braun & Clarke (2022) · Phase 2: Coding · 13 Codes · 5 Themes · 72 Posts

RQ1: How do different cultural contexts (UK vs India) define and express sustainable fashion? | RQ2: What cultural ideologies underpin these narratives?

Post #	Brand	Date	Format	Caption / Key Text	Visual Description	Sustainability Keywords	Code(s) Applied	Theme	RQ Li
1	FabIndia	03 Jan 2025	Reel	Layers Of My Day *Winter Mornings* As the winter chill sets in, the New Year calls for fresh beginnings and cozy layers. Mornings are a gentle pause, a moment to	Layered cotton, linen, wool garments; warm, everyday setting	handwoven, cotton, linen, wool, layering	C-01, C-03, C-04	Cultural Responsibility	RQ1
2	Stella McCartney	07 Jan 2025	Reel	STELLA SPRING: Introducing my new Spring 2025 collection... Crafted using 91% conscious, 100% cruelty-free materials." (2,061 likes)	Shots of bags, a funny reel with smiling faces and a lot of personality statement	conscious, cruelty-free, vegan, innovation	C-07, C-08, C-09, C-10	Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability	RQ1
3	FabIndia	10 Jan 2025	Reel	**Bim**', as she was known to her friends passed away today. Her family, friends and her Fabindia family mourn her passing. She loved matching everything, from her accessories to her chappals. A spirited promoter and patron...	Memorial portrait and tribute text	legacy, craftspeople, community, heritage	C-05, C-06, C-12	Cultural Responsibility	RQ2
4	Stella McCartney	01 Jan 2025	Reel	"STELLABRATION: It's about time we celebrated everything we did in 2024."	Figure lying amid waste; luxury styling; dramatic editorial framing newspaper titled "The Stella Times"	sustainability, celebration, progress	C-08, C-11, C-13	Contested Sustainability Narratives	RQ2
5	FabIndia	26 Jan 2025	Image	As we watch our tricolour flutter with pride this day, it's a good time to reflect on the beauty and diversity in every corner of our country. May our country's rich heritage and traditions continue to inspire us.	The reel states "Celebrate the beauty that reflects in each corner of the country." Showcasing Artisan hands working with block-printed textiles; craft process imagery	heritage, tradition, craft, community	C-02, C-06, C-12	Cultural Responsibility	RQ1 &

Data Analysis | Codebook | Themes | RQ Summary | +



· Sustainable Fashion from West to South · FabIndia vs Stella McCartney · Instagram 2025

: Thematic Analysis · Braun & Clarke (2022) · Phase 2: Coding · 13 Codes · 5 Themes · 72 Posts

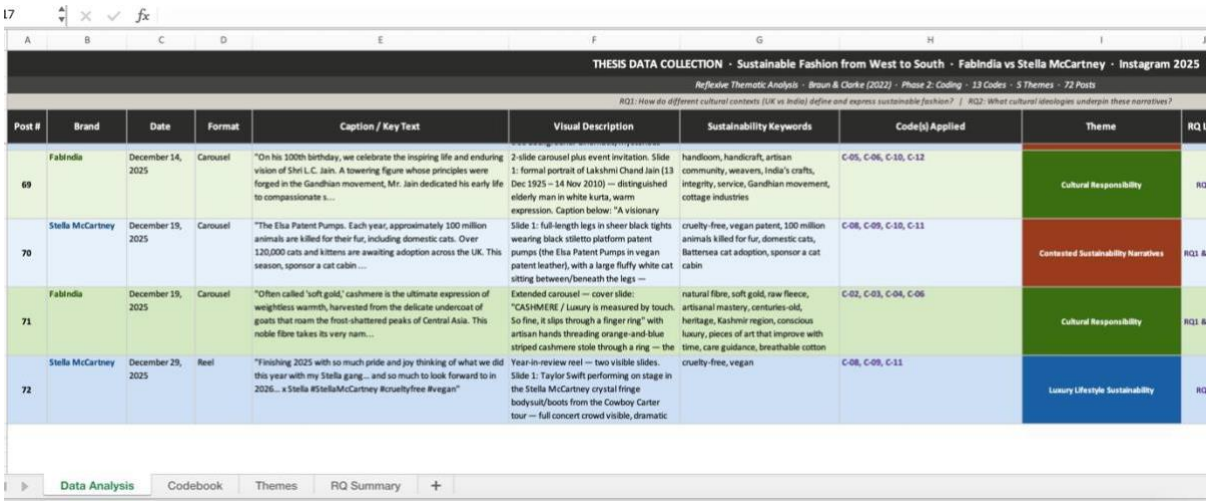
l contexts (UK vs India) define and express sustainable fashion? | RQ2: What cultural ideologies underpin these narratives?

alnability Keywords	Code(s) Applied	Theme	RQ Link	Key Analytical Finding (simplified)	Likes	Notes for Examiner
, cotton, linen, wool, layering	C-01, C-03, C-04	Cultural Responsibility	RQ1	FabIndia embeds sustainability in everyday material logic — natural fibre layering without any environmental claim.	2275	Connects to RQ1: sustainability defined through material choice, not environmental language.
ruelty-free, vegan, innovation	C-07, C-08, C-09, C-10	Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability	RQ1	Stella positions sustainability as designer-led luxury identity through quantified ethical claims.	2061	Connects to RQ1 & RQ2: Western luxury sustainability as designed identity marker (Al-Issa, 2024).
tspeople, community,	C-05, C-06, C-12	Cultural Responsibility	RQ2	FabIndia frames sustainability as institutional human care and intergenerational stewardship.	3296	Connects to RQ2: community care as sustainability — absent from Western luxury model.
y, celebration, progress	C-08, C-11, C-13	Contested Sustainability Narratives	RQ2	Stella uses brand celebration as an implicit sustainability statement — self-affirmation without evidence.	2169	Connects to RQ2: Greenwashing through self-celebration — no verifiable claim (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).
dition, craft, community	C-02, C-06, C-12	Cultural Responsibility	RQ1 & RQ2	FabIndia connects craft heritage to national identity — Republic Day as cultural sustainability.	276	Connects to RQ1 & RQ2: craft as national identity — sustainability as cultural inheritance.

Data Analysis | Codebook | Themes | RQ Summary | +

Appendix B

Data Analysis Sample Screenshot — December 2025



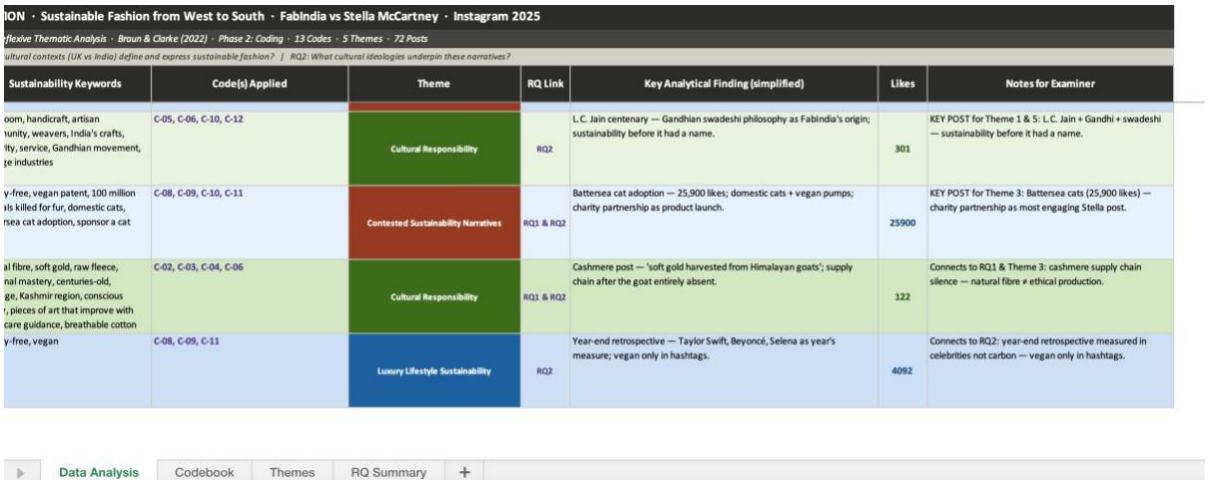
THESIS DATA COLLECTION · Sustainable Fashion from West to South · FabIndia vs Stella McCartney · Instagram 2025

Reflexive Thematic Analysis · Braun & Clarke (2022) · Phase 2: Coding · 13 Codes · 5 Themes · 72 Posts

RQ1: How do different cultural contexts (UK vs India) define and express sustainable fashion? | RQ2: What cultural ideologies underpin these narratives?

Post #	Brand	Date	Format	Caption / Key Text	Visual Description	Sustainability Keywords	Code(s) Applied	Theme	RQ
69	FabIndia	December 14, 2025	Carousel	"On his 100th birthday, we celebrate the inspiring life and enduring vision of Shri L.C. Jain. A towering figure whose principles were forged in the Gandhian movement, Mr. Jain dedicated his early life to compassionate s…	2-slide carousel plus event invitation. Slide 1: formal portrait of Lakshmi Chand Jain (13 Dec 1925 – 14 Nov 2010) — distinguished elderly man in white kurta, warm expression. Caption below: "A visionary	handloom, handicraft, artisan community, weavers, India's crafts, integrity, service, Gandhian movement, cottage industries	C-05, C-06, C-10, C-12	Cultural Responsibility	RQ
70	Stella McCartney	December 19, 2025	Carousel	"The Elsa Patent Pumps. Each year, approximately 100 million animals are killed for their fur, including domestic cats. Over 120,000 cats and kittens are awaiting adoption across the UK. This season, sponsor a cat cabin …	Slide 1: full-length legs in sheer black tights wearing black stiletto platform patent pumps (the Elsa Patent Pumps in vegan patent leather), with a large fluffy white cat sitting between/beneath the legs —	cruelty-free, vegan patent, 100 million animals killed for fur, domestic cats, Battersea cat adoption, sponsor a cat cabin	C-08, C-09, C-10, C-11	Contested Sustainability Narratives	RQ1 &
71	FabIndia	December 19, 2025	Carousel	"Often called 'soft gold,' cashmere is the ultimate expression of weightless warmth, harvested from the delicate undercoat of goats that roam the frost-shattered peaks of Central Asia. This noble fibre takes its very nam…	Extended carousel — cover slide: "CASHMERE / Luxury is measured by touch. So fine, it slips through a finger ring" with artisan hands threading orange-and-blue striped cashmere stole through a ring — the	natural fibre, soft gold, raw fleece, artisanal mastery, centuries-old, heritage, Kashmir region, conscious luxury, pieces of art that improve with time, care guidance, breathable cotton	C-02, C-03, C-04, C-06	Cultural Responsibility	RQ1 &
72	Stella McCartney	December 29, 2025	Reel	"Finishing 2025 with so much pride and joy thinking of what we did this year with my Stella gang… and so much to look forward to in 2026… x Stella #StellaMcCartney #crueltyfree #vegan"	Year-in-review reel — two visible slides. Slide 1: Taylor Swift performing on stage in the Stella McCartney crystal fringe bodysuit/boots from the Cowboy Carter tour — full concert crowd visible, dramatic	cruelty-free, vegan	C-08, C-09, C-11	Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability	RQ

Data Analysis | Codebook | Themes | RQ Summary | +



ION · Sustainable Fashion from West to South · FabIndia vs Stella McCartney · Instagram 2025

flexive Thematic Analysis · Braun & Clarke (2022) · Phase 2: Coding · 13 Codes · 5 Themes · 72 Posts

ultural contexts (UK vs India) define and express sustainable fashion? | RQ2: What cultural ideologies underpin these narratives?

Sustainability Keywords	Code(s) Applied	Theme	RQ Link	Key Analytical Finding (simplified)	Likes	Notes for Examiner
oom, handicraft, artisan unity, weavers, India's crafts, ity, service, Gandhian movement, ge industries	C-05, C-06, C-10, C-12	Cultural Responsibility	RQ2	L.C. Jain centenary — Gandhian swadeshi philosophy as FabIndia's origin; sustainability before it had a name.	301	KEY POST for Theme 1 & 5: L.C. Jain + Gandhi + swadeshi — sustainability before it had a name.
y-free, vegan patent, 100 million ls killed for fur, domestic cats, sea cat adoption, sponsor a cat	C-08, C-09, C-10, C-11	Contested Sustainability Narratives	RQ1 & RQ2	Battersea cat adoption — 25,900 likes; domestic cats + vegan pumps; charity partnership as product launch.	25900	KEY POST for Theme 3: Battersea cats (25,900 likes) — charity partnership as most engaging Stella post.
al fibre, soft gold, raw fleece, nal mastery, centuries-old, ge, Kashmir region, conscious , pieces of art that improve with care guidance, breathable cotton	C-02, C-03, C-04, C-06	Cultural Responsibility	RQ1 & RQ2	Cashmere post — 'soft gold harvested from Himalayan goats'; supply chain after the goat entirely absent.	122	Connects to RQ1 & Theme 3: cashmere supply chain silence — natural fibre ≠ ethical production.
y-free, vegan	C-08, C-09, C-11	Luxury Lifestyle Sustainability	RQ2	Year-end retrospective — Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, Selena as year's measure; vegan only in hashtags.	4092	Connects to RQ2: year-end retrospective measured in celebrities not carbon — vegan only in hashtags.

Data Analysis | Codebook | Themes | RQ Summary | +

Appendix C

List of Posts

Post 1 — FabIndia [@fabindiaofficial]. (2025, November 3). Gurpurab reel. Instagram.

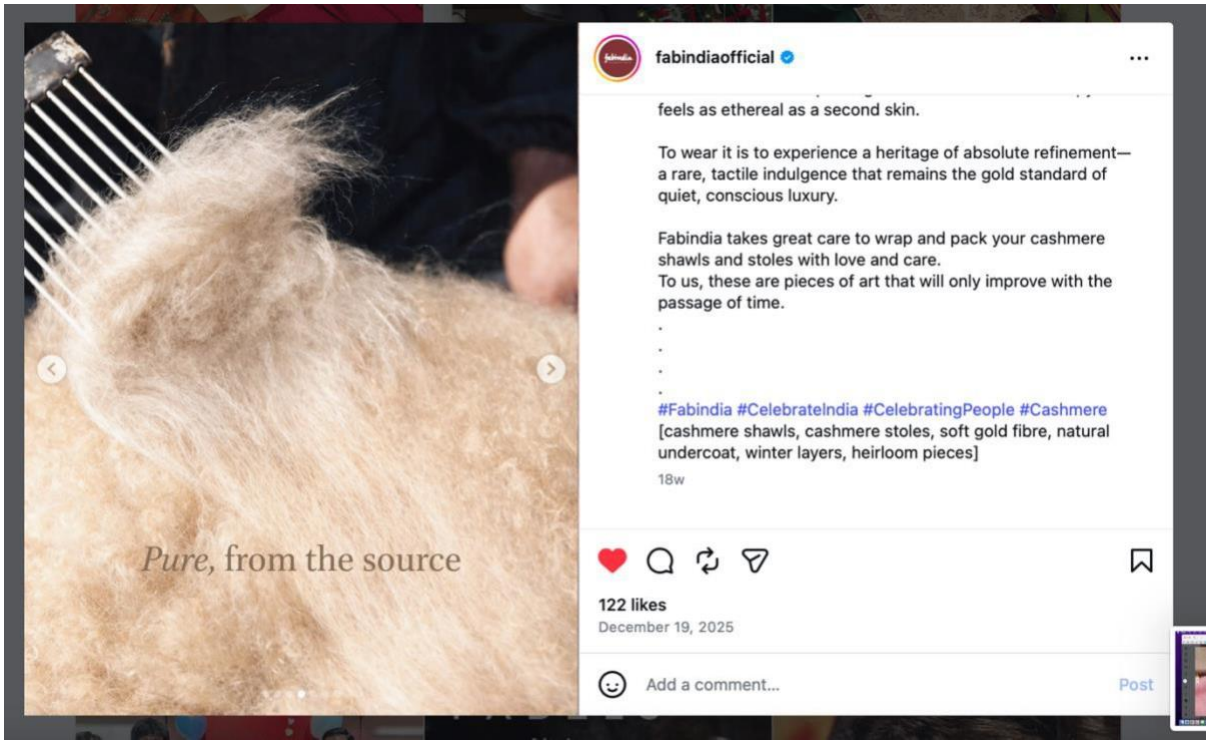


Post 2 — FabIndia [@fabindiaofficial]. (2025, February 25). Chikankari embroidery carousel. Instagram.



Post 3 — FabIndia [@fabindiaofficial]. (2025, December 19). Cashmere post. Instagram.





Post 4 — FabIndia [@fabindiaofficial]. (2025, December 14). L.C. Jain centenary carousel. Instagram.



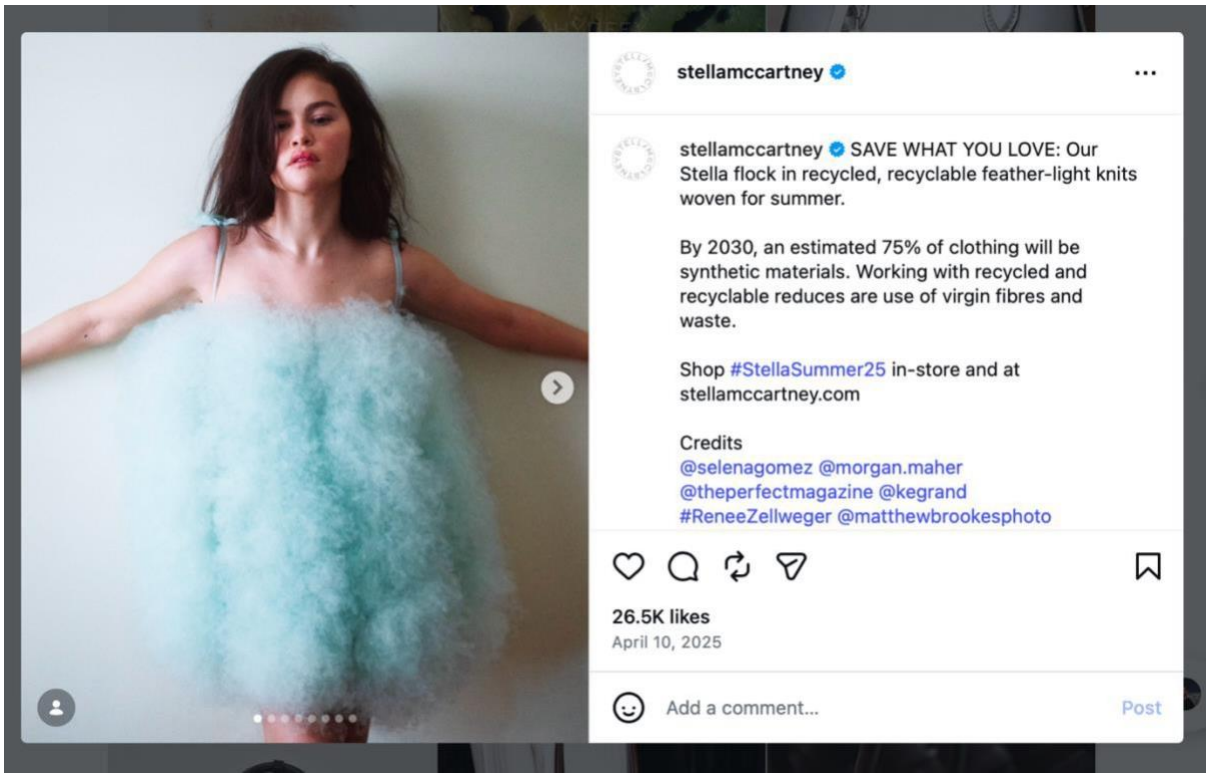
Post 5 — Stella McCartney [@stellamccartney]. (2025, March 7). Winter 25 show celebrity carousel. Instagram.



Post 6 — Stella McCartney [@stellamccartney]. (2025, November 5). Taylor Swift paparazzi carousel. Instagram.

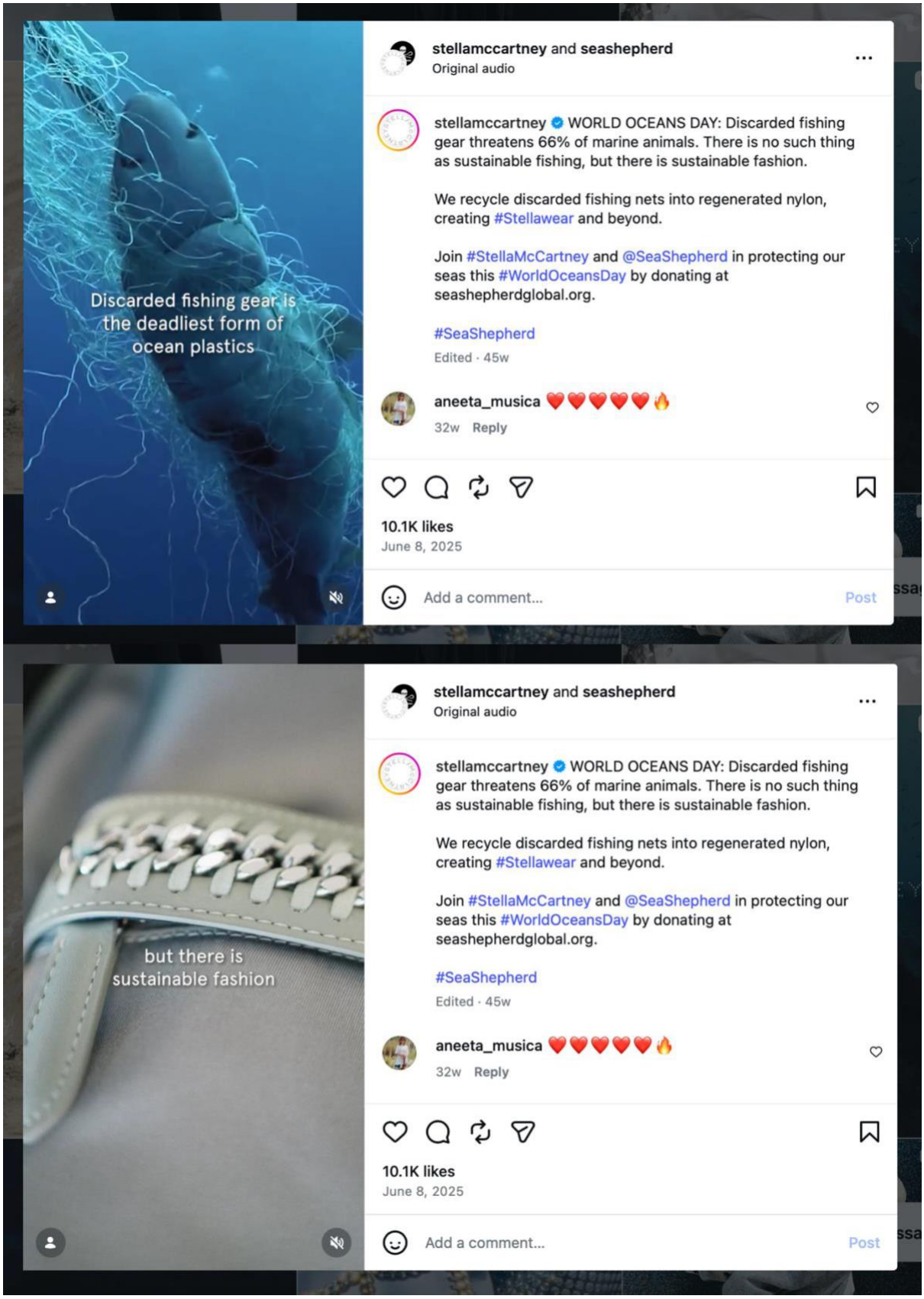


Post 7 — Stella McCartney [@stellamccartney]. (2025, April 10). Selena Gomez recycled knits carousel. Instagram.

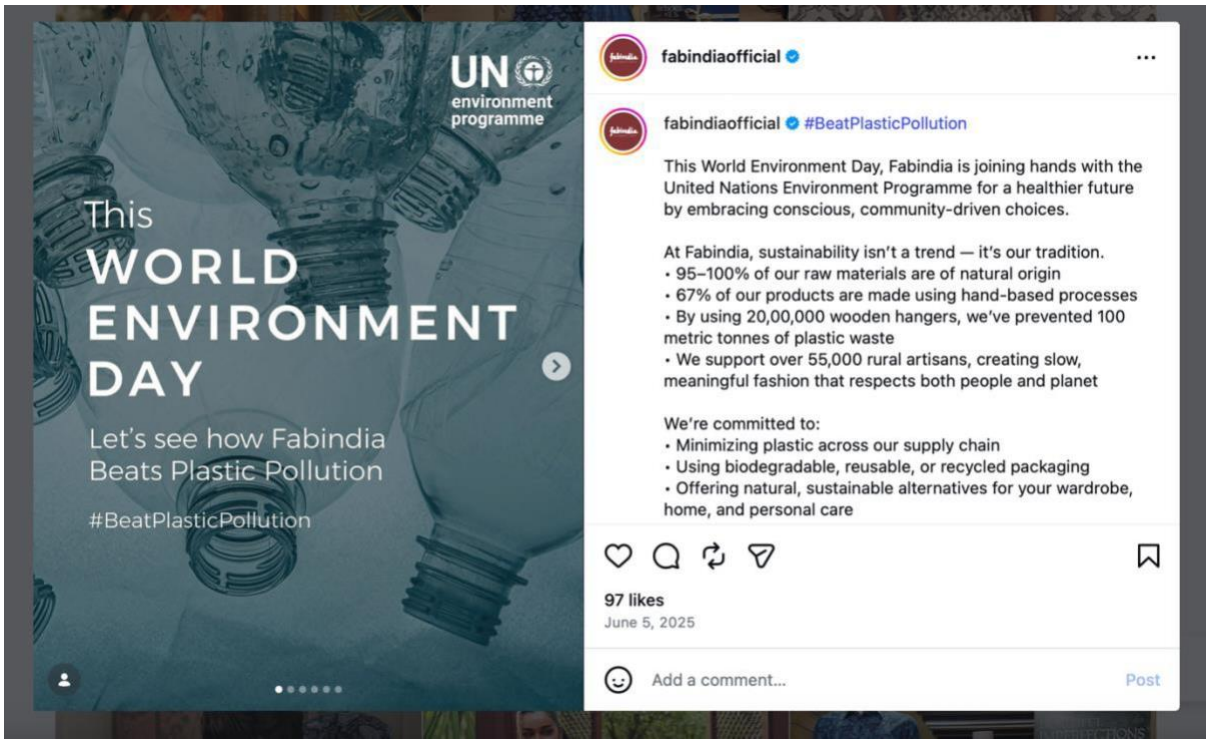


Post 8 — Stella McCartney [@stellamccartney]. (2025, June 8). World Oceans Day reel. Instagram.

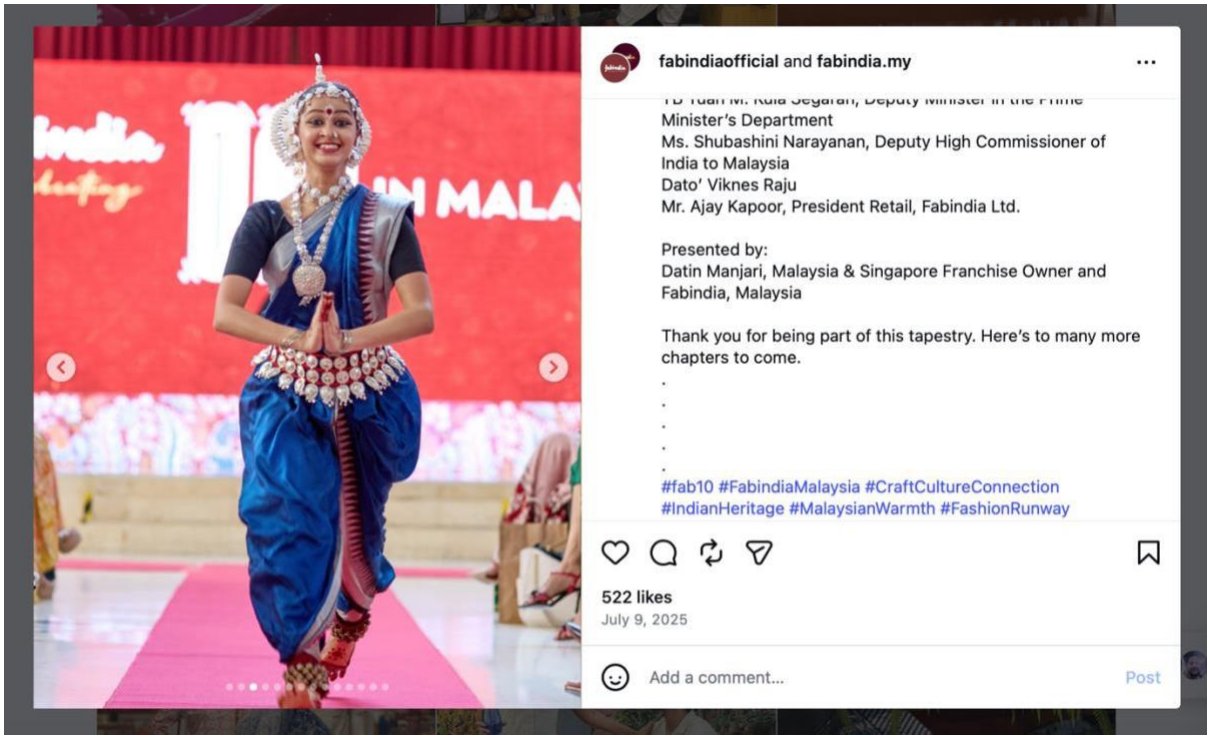
(next page)


Discarded fishing gear is the deadliest form of ocean plastics
stellamccartney and seashepherd
Original audio
stellamccartney WORLD OCEANS DAY: Discarded fishing gear threatens 66% of marine animals. There is no such thing as sustainable fishing, but there is sustainable fashion.
We recycle discarded fishing nets into regenerated nylon, creating #Stellawear and beyond.
Join #StellaMcCartney and @SeaShepherd in protecting our seas this #WorldOceansDay by donating at seashepherdglobal.org.
#SeaShepherd
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32w Reply
10.1K likes
June 8, 2025
Add a comment...
Post
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10.1K likes
June 8, 2025
Add a comment...
Post

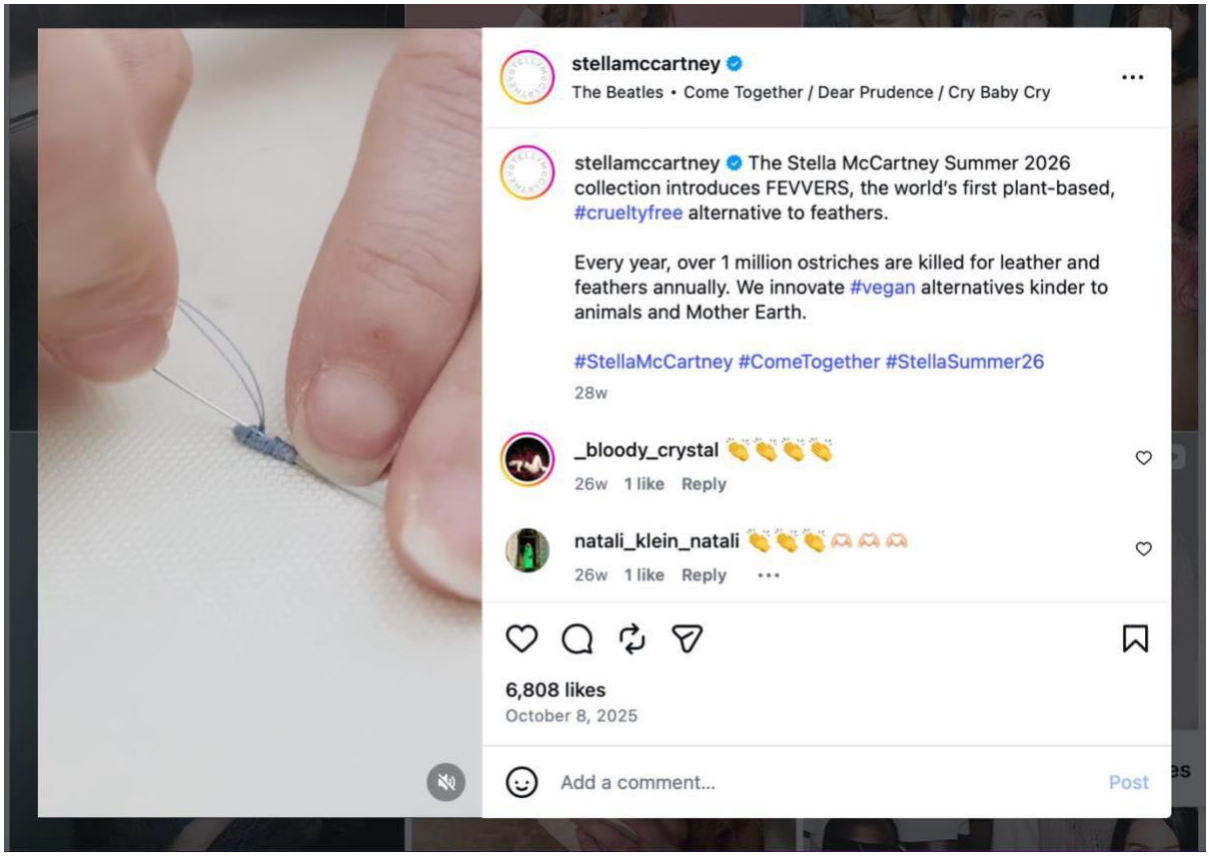
Post 9 — FabIndia [@fabindiaofficial]. (2025, June 5). World Environment Day carousel. Instagram.



Post 10 — FabIndia [@fabindiaofficial]. (2025, July 9). Malaysia 10th anniversary carousel. Instagram.



Post 11 — Stella McCartney [@stellamccartney]. (2025, October 8). FEVVERS reel. Instagram



Glossary

Aari — a chain stitch embroidery technique using a hooked needle (aari), originating in Kashmir and widely practised across India, used to create fine floral and paisley patterns on fabric and leather.

Asia Floor Wage — a benchmark established by an alliance of labour rights organisations across Asia to define the minimum income necessary for a garment worker in Asia to meet basic living needs with dignity — including food, housing, healthcare, education for children, and a small amount of savings. It is calculated independently of national minimum wages, which labour rights organisations consistently identify as insufficient. The Asia Floor Wage Alliance (2022) documents that Indian garment workers are paid significantly below this benchmark, reflecting the structural power asymmetry between Western brands that dictate pricing and South Asian producers who bear the cost pressures.

Banarasi — a silk weaving tradition from Varanasi (Banaras), Uttar Pradesh, known for its fine silk, gold and silver brocade work, and intricate floral and foliate patterns rooted in Mughal design influence.

Bharatanatyam — one of India's oldest classical dance forms, originating in Tamil Nadu and rooted in Hindu temple traditions. Characterised by precise footwork, expressive hand gestures, and facial expressions, it is considered both a devotional practice and a performing art form carrying centuries of cultural and spiritual knowledge.

Chanakya International — a Mumbai-based embroidery house founded in 1986, recognised as one of the world's foremost luxury embroidery ateliers. Carrying thirteen generations of Indian artisanal knowledge, it produces hand-embroidered textiles for leading global luxury fashion houses including Dior, Chanel, and Stella McCartney. Despite its central role in global luxury production, it remains largely invisible within Western sustainability and fashion narratives.

Chanderi — a lightweight handwoven fabric produced in Chanderi, Madhya Pradesh, combining silk and cotton with distinctive translucency, traditionally featuring gold and silver zari motifs.

Coloniality — an enduring structure of power, theorised by Mignolo (2007), that operates through the control of epistemic authority — determining whose knowledge counts as legitimate and whose is marginalised within dominant institutional frameworks.

Commercial megatrend — a term used by Henninger et al. (2016) to describe sustainability's evolution within fashion branding from a niche ethical concern into a pervasive, broadly deployed marketing concept, whose meaning becomes increasingly diluted through widespread and strategic commercial use.

Discursive resource — a concept whose meaning is not fixed but actively produced and contested within commercial and institutional systems, available for mobilisation by competing interests.

Epistemic agency — the capacity of an individual, community, or culture to produce, validate, and circulate knowledge on its own terms, without requiring external institutional legitimisation. In postcolonial scholarship, epistemic agency refers specifically to the ability of non-Western knowledge systems to assert their own validity rather than seeking recognition within frameworks inherited from colonial structures. Drawn from Mignolo (2007).

Ghicha Silk — a textured silk fabric produced from the leftover or broken threads of the cocoon, originating in Jharkhand and Bihar, associated with tribal weaving traditions and characterised by its irregular, naturally textured surface.

Gold Khari — a block printing technique using metallic gold pigment, predominantly practised in Rajasthan, applied to fabric to create festive and ceremonial textiles.

Gota Patti — a traditional embroidery technique originating in Rajasthan, using strips of metallic ribbon woven or stitched onto fabric to create intricate patterns, historically associated with royal and ceremonial dress.

Greenwashing — the strategic misrepresentation of a brand's environmental credentials, whereby a more sustainable image is projected than actual practices warrant (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015).

Himru weave — a traditional handwoven fabric originating in Aurangabad, Maharashtra, historically produced for the Mughal court. Characterised by its intricate silk and cotton blend with raised patterns created on a special loom, it represents one of India's most technically demanding weaving traditions and was revived by Suraiya Hasan Bose.

Intergenerational knowledge — the accumulated practices, values, and ways of making transmitted across generations within a community rather than through formal institutional channels. In the context of craft-based sustainability, it refers specifically to the ecological, material, and technical knowledge held within artisan communities — knowledge of land, fibre, dye, and technique — passed down through practice, observation, and apprenticeship rather than written documentation or academic codification. This form of knowledge, as Mignolo (2007) and Patara and Nayak (2025) argue, is frequently rendered invisible within Western sustainability frameworks that privilege formally documented and institutionally validated knowledge systems.

Kantha — a traditional embroidery and quilting technique from West Bengal, India, in which worn or discarded cotton saris and fabrics are layered and hand-stitched into new textiles, historically practised as a form of domestic craft that transforms material remnants into functional and decorative objects.

Kowdhi — a traditional quilting practice in which fabric remnants are reworked into functional and culturally valued textiles, reflecting craft traditions of material reuse and transformation within Indian household and community practice.

Lifestyle adjacency — a brand communication strategy in which a product or brand generates sustainability or ethical credibility not through direct environmental claims but through association with aspirational lifestyle content, celebrity culture, or culturally prestigious contexts. The brand's ethical identity is transferred onto adjacent content — a wine collaboration, a celebrity appearance, a personal memory — without any explicit sustainability argument being made.

Maheshwari — a handwoven silk-cotton fabric originating in Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh, on the banks of the Narmada River, known for its distinctive reversible border and traditionally produced by women weavers.

Minimalism — a consumption philosophy centred on reducing material possessions, maintaining existing items rather than replacing them, and making intentional, considered purchasing decisions. Within Western sustainability discourse, minimalism is often positioned as an individual-level response to overconsumption, though scholars note its limited capacity to challenge systemic production models (Martin-Woodhead, 2021).

Neocolonial formations — the ongoing global diffusion of Western market logics and the continued privileging of Western institutional knowledge within academic and policy discourse, persisting long after formal colonial rule has ended.

Parasocial identification — a one-sided emotional relationship in which an audience member develops a sense of intimacy, familiarity, and personal connection with a media figure or celebrity, despite having no direct interaction with them. The relationship feels mutual to the audience but exists entirely through mediated content. In the context of brand communication, parasocial identification is strategically cultivated to transfer the emotional credibility of a celebrity onto the brand they are associated with.

Pittal Brass — a metalwork tradition using brass (pittal in Hindi) to create decorative and functional objects, incorporated into textile embellishments and craft traditions across several Indian regions.

Quiet luxury — an aesthetic trend prominent in Western fashion discourse from approximately 2023 onwards, characterised by understated elegance, neutral tones, high-quality materials, and the deliberate absence of visible branding. Associated with wealth signalling through restraint rather than ostentation, it represents a shift in Western luxury consumer identity toward discretion and permanence over conspicuous consumption.

Reflexive thematic analysis — a qualitative research methodology developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022) that positions the researcher's subjectivity not as a source of bias to be minimised but as an active and acknowledged component of the analytical process. Unlike earlier approaches to thematic analysis that sought standardised procedures and researcher neutrality, reflexive thematic analysis foregrounds the interpretive role of the researcher in constructing themes from data rather than discovering them. It requires explicit reflection on how the researcher's positionality, theoretical commitments, and analytical decisions shape the findings produced.

Rs. 3 million — an income threshold used in Upadhyay and Kamble's (2025) study to identify high-income urban Indian consumers, marking the income bracket within which ethical fashion participation is most heavily concentrated.

Subaltern — a term drawn from postcolonial scholarship, particularly Spivak's (1988) foundational essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, referring to those who occupy the margins of dominant social, economic, and political structures and whose voices, knowledge, and experiences are systematically excluded from representation within those structures. In the

context of this study, the term is applied to artisan communities whose craft knowledge and labour underpin global fashion systems while remaining structurally unrecognised within the sustainability narratives those systems produce.

Sujani — a traditional embroidery technique from Bihar, India, in which discarded or worn fabrics are repurposed into richly textured surfaces through layered hand-stitching, often depicting narrative or symbolic imagery and historically practised by women within rural communities.

Swadeshi — a political and economic philosophy associated with Mahatma Gandhi's independence movement, advocating the use of locally produced goods — particularly handspun and handwoven textiles — as a form of resistance against British colonial trade and industrial imports. Derived from the Sanskrit words *swa* (self) and *desh* (country), meaning "of one's own country."

Tiranga — literally meaning "tricolour" in Hindi, the Tiranga is the national flag of India, comprising three horizontal bands of saffron, white, and green, with the Ashoka Chakra at its centre. It carries deep symbolic associations with Indian independence, national identity, and the anti-colonial movement.

Western epistemologies — frameworks for determining what counts as valid knowledge, who has the authority to produce it, and whose knowledge systems are considered legitimate and universal. Rooted in Enlightenment traditions of rationalism, empiricism, and scientific method, Western epistemologies have historically positioned themselves as objective and universal while treating non-Western ways of knowing as local, partial, or pre-scientific. In the context of sustainability discourse, Western epistemological frameworks determine which practices are recognised as sustainable, which knowledge systems are valued, and whose expertise is consulted — structurally disadvantaging craft-based, community-rooted, and intergenerational knowledge systems that do not conform to their categories of validation. Drawn from Mignolo (2007) and Spivak (1988).