

Sustainable Consumption Across Contexts: A Comparative Analysis of Cultural and Economic Drivers in India and Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how consumer responses to sustainability differ between India and Singapore, focusing on the cultural and economic factors that shape sustainable consumption. Using data from surveys from 70 respondents and a theory-driven thematic analysis, the research evaluates the applicability of the Value-Belief Norm framework, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, cognitive dissonance theory and Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Findings reveal uniformly high sustainability awareness across both countries, but a persistent value-action gap. Contrary to expectations, economic barriers were more pronounced in Singapore, while distrust in sustainably claims emerged as a primary barrier in India. Cultural influence plays a significantly stronger role in India, reflecting its collective orientation, whereas individualised decision-making dominates in Singapore. The study concludes that sustainable consumption is shaped by the interaction of trust, cultural norms and perceived behavioural feasibility rather than just income or awareness, highlighting the need for context-specific sustainability strategies.

Keywords: Sustainable consumption, cultural influences, price sensitivity, institutional legitimacy, India, Singapore

Research Question: How do consumer responses to sustainability differ between India and Singapore, and what role do cultural and economic factors play in shaping these responses?

Introduction

Why do some consumers embrace eco-friendly choices while others ignore them, even when faced with the same global crisis?

As the urgency of environmental degradation and climate change continues to grow, sustainable consumer behaviour is emerging as one of the most powerful tools in shaping a greener future. Still, the decision to “go green” isn’t so simple. From what people choose to buy to how much

they're willing to spend, all consumer choices play a role in driving or delaying progress toward sustainability.

So, what influences consumer choices? It boils down to an amalgamation of several internal and external factors. While the former includes the psychological rationale driving such purchase decisions based on consumer beliefs and values, the latter is more focused on factors such as the economic status of the country one resides in, the prominent cultural characteristics and attitudes as well as access to information and trust in institutions.

While considerable research has been conducted on how people make sustainable choices within their own countries, surprisingly little is known about how those choices compare across vastly different parts of the world. Few studies examine how a country's social, economic and cultural values influence sustainable consumer behavior. The contrast may be particularly striking when comparing countries like India, a developing nation with rising environmental awareness but significant income disparities, and Singapore, a highly developed country with greater infrastructure and purchasing power, but different cultural motivations. Addressing this gap, this paper asks: **How do consumer responses to sustainability differ between India and Singapore, and what role do cultural and economic factors play in shaping these responses?**

At the heart of this paper is the belief that cultural values and economic conditions significantly influence how people engage with sustainability. By comparing two countries at very different stages of development and with two very different cultures, India and Singapore, this research aims to uncover not only how people think and act differently, but also how global solutions can become more meaningful by adapting to what works in each local context.

Literature Review

Sustainability, especially in consumer behaviour, is a broad idea that can be traced back to the Brundtland Report published by the United Nations (1987), which defined sustainable development as meeting “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” In consumer behaviour, sustainability refers to how people make choices about what they buy, based on the long-term impacts on the environment, as well as on society and the economy. “Sustainable consumption refers to practices that aim to limit environmental degradation caused by unchecked production and consumption patterns” (Biscontini, 2024). In this sense, sustainability is not just about protecting nature - it is a behavioral concept and issue, since it involves people making conscious choices in their daily lives (Peattie, 2010).

There has been extensive research to understand why people choose to buy sustainably. The Theory of Planned Behaviour, proposed by Icek Ajzen (1991), suggests that someone's intention to purchase depends on three factors: attitude, subjective norms and behavioral control. With regard to sustainable consumption, people will be more inclined to exhibit such behaviours if they hold a positive attitude towards sustainability, witness people around them doing the same and feel as though they can easily access sustainable goods and services. Of these factors, consumer attitudes may be recognised as the most powerful indicator as they are a culmination of prior knowledge, biases and opinions, and this gives consumers a heightened sense of knowledge and consequently greater behavioural control over their choices.

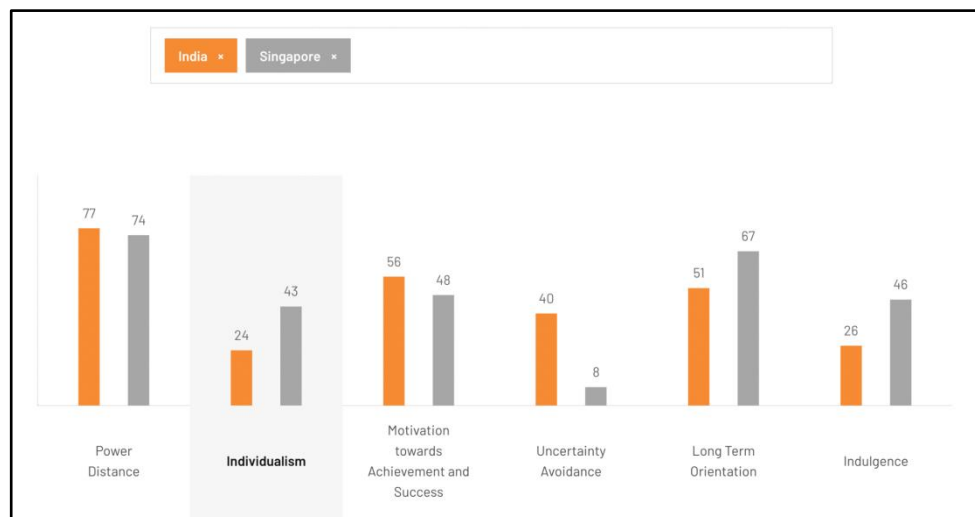
Another useful theory is the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory developed by Stern et al. (1999). By linking individuals' values, beliefs about consequences, personal responsibility, ecological world views and moral norms, this thesis aimed to explain pro-environmental behaviour. It essentially posits that anyone who values caring for others or nature will develop strong beliefs about environmental issues and start to feel an internal obligation to help. This usually results in them showcasing or displaying sustainable consumption behaviours. Studies have supported these theories by finding that individuals who are aware of environmental damage, care about their health, or hold strong ethical beliefs are, in fact, more motivated to purchase sustainable products (Joshi and Rahman, 2015). This theory is quite important because it emphasises internal motivations rather than external incentives. It is therefore suitable for understanding behaviours that may not easily be influenced by price or regulation.

That said, people may encounter many barriers that restrict their ability to exhibit sustainable consumption behaviours. This can be understood better through the cognitive dissonance theory. Festinger introduced this concept in 1957 and described it as the mental discomfort experienced by people when their beliefs and actions are inconsistent (McLeod, 2023). In this context, people may want to purchase sustainable goods and services but experience dissonance because these beliefs cannot manifest into action. Statistics show that this is a real problem: approximately 65% of consumers say they want to purchase from sustainable brands, but only 26% follow through, often being held back by internal conflicts or perceived barriers (White, Hardisty and Habib, 2019). Elaborating further, one of the most consistently identified barriers to sustainable consumption in the literature is the cost premium associated with environmentally friendly products. Consumers often perceive sustainable products as being more expensive than conventional alternatives. A global study found that 38% of consumers identify affordability as the biggest obstacle to sustainable purchases, even when overall willingness to pay for sustainability remains strong (von der Gathen et al., 2024). Given this pattern, it seems plausible to assume that consumers in developing countries with lower average incomes, such as India, would be even more price-sensitive than those in more developed economies such as Singapore.

This assumption aligns with traditional economic models of consumer choice, where limited budgets increase the marginal cost of premium-priced goods, making affordability a critical determinant of actual purchasing behaviour. Another important barrier may be a lack of trust in authorities. A prime reason this arises is due to greenwashing, i.e., when companies exaggerate their eco-friendly image (United Nations, 2025). This is a big issue across industries. For instance, according to a 2022 study by Changing Markets Foundation, 59% of the green claims by European and UK fashion brands were either misleading or outright false. When trust between consumers and brands is lacking, even well-intentioned consumers may avoid sustainable purchases.

However, that being said, scholars are increasingly arguing that beyond these economic and institutional factors, culture plays a pivotal role in shaping motivations, values and the interpretation of environmental concerns. Hofstede's cultural framework remains one of the most widely used models for operationalising such cultural differences. A screenshot comparing India and Singapore for each of the different Hofstede dimensions can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (India versus Singapore)



Individualism-collectivism, particularly, is described by the framework as a key cultural dimension that influences social behaviour and values across societies. Consumers in collective cultures like India may be more responsive to social norms and group-oriented messaging, potentially leading to different patterns of sustainable consumption compared with those in individualistic cultures, such as that found in Singapore, where self-interest and personal beliefs are prioritised. There exist empirical studies that provide mixed evidence on how individualism and collectivism relate to sustainable behaviour. While some find that collectivist orientations

enhance sustainable consumption because of heightened concern for group welfare and environmental stewardship, others note that individualistic motivations linked to self-benefit may also promote sustainability when environmental actions produce personal advantages (Ur Rahman et al., 2021). Nonetheless, cultural analysis consistently affirms that culture does shape the motivational landscape through which psychological and economic factors are interpreted and acted upon, offering critical context for cross-national comparisons.

Based on the above analysis, this paper presents the following hypotheses:

- H1: Awareness and trust in sustainable products are higher in Singapore than in India.
- H2: Economic barriers, such as price and access, are more significant in India.
- H3: Cultural and community influences play a stronger role in India's consumer decision-making.

Methodology

This study adopted a comparative mixed-methods research design in order to examine how consumer responses to sustainability differ between India and Singapore and to assess the role of cultural and economic factors in shaping these responses. A mixed methods approach was selected to allow for both quantitative comparison of consumer attitudes and behaviours and qualitative thematic exploration of underlying motivations and barriers. This enabled a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable consumption patterns across two distinct cultural contexts.

The primary data was collected using two identical online surveys, one administered in India and the other in Singapore. Each survey received 35 valid responses, resulting in a total sample size of 70 participants. The respondents represented a diverse range of age groups, education levels and occupational backgrounds, with a notable concentration of participants aged 45 and above in both countries. While this demographic limits generalisability, it does provide insight into sustainability perceptions among economically active and experienced consumers who play a significant role in purchasing decisions.

The data was collected through a structured Google Forms in which questions were divided into five main sections:

- Section A captured demographic information.
- Section B assessed awareness and attitudes towards sustainability.
- Section C examined sustainable purchasing behaviours and perceived barriers.
- Section D explored cultural and economic influences on decision-making.
- Section E evaluated perceptions of sustainability campaigns and government initiatives.

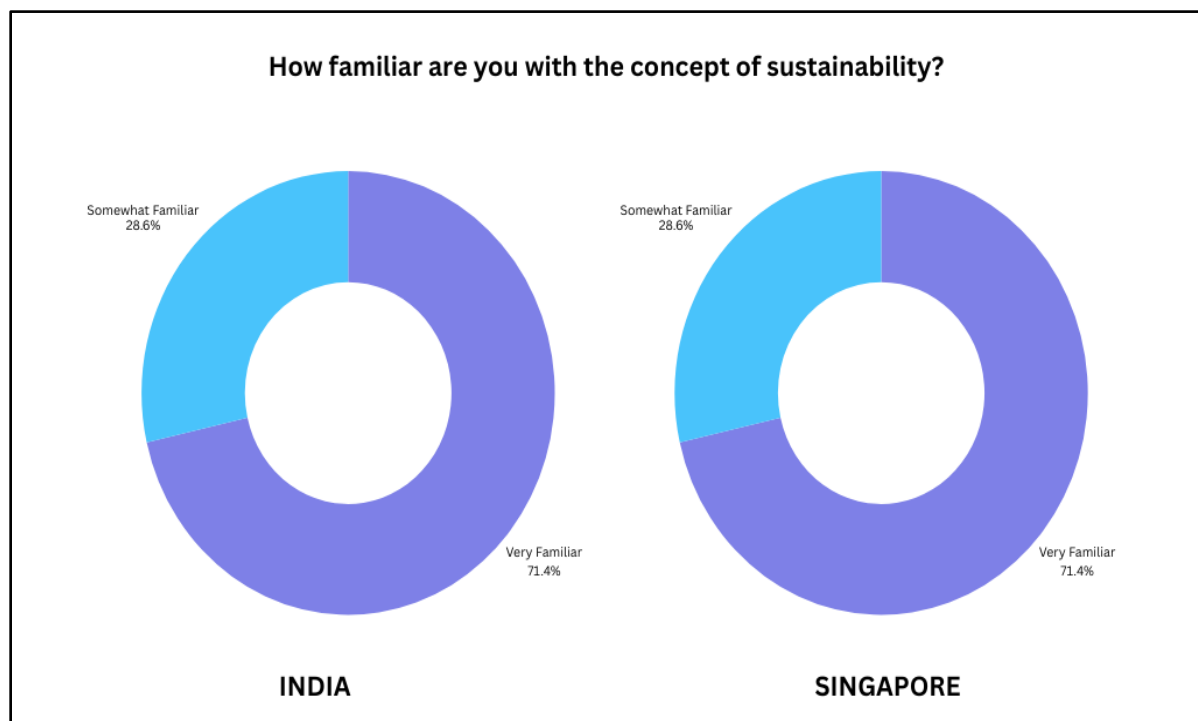
The questionnaire incorporated Likert-scale questions, multiple-choice questions as well as some open-ended response options which allowed respondents to elaborate on motivations and perceived barriers. The use of identical questions in both countries ensured comparability and internal consistency.

After the data were collected, the analysis was conducted in two stages: a quantitative descriptive analysis and a qualitative thematic analysis. With regard to the quantitative analysis, the closed-ended responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, primarily frequencies and percentages, to identify patterns and contrasts between Indian and Singaporean residents. These comparisons were used to test the study's hypothesis related to awareness, economic barriers and cultural influence. The qualitative component of the analysis, on the other hand, followed Braun and Clarke's 2006 framework for thematic analysis, ensuring methodological rigour and transparency.

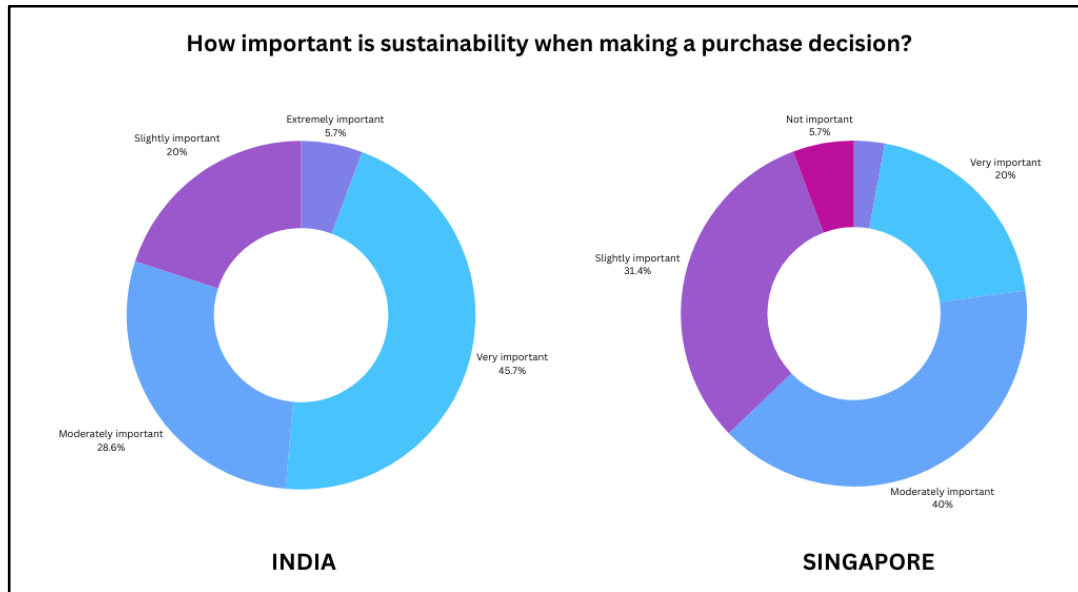
Data Analysis

Coding

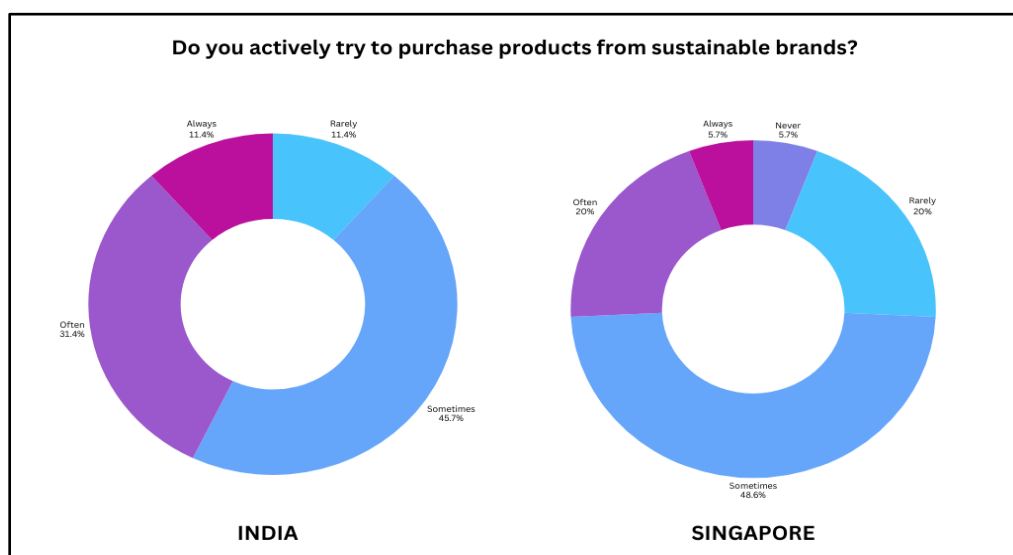
Code 1 - High sustainability awareness (Derived from the following question: How familiar are you with the concept of sustainability?)



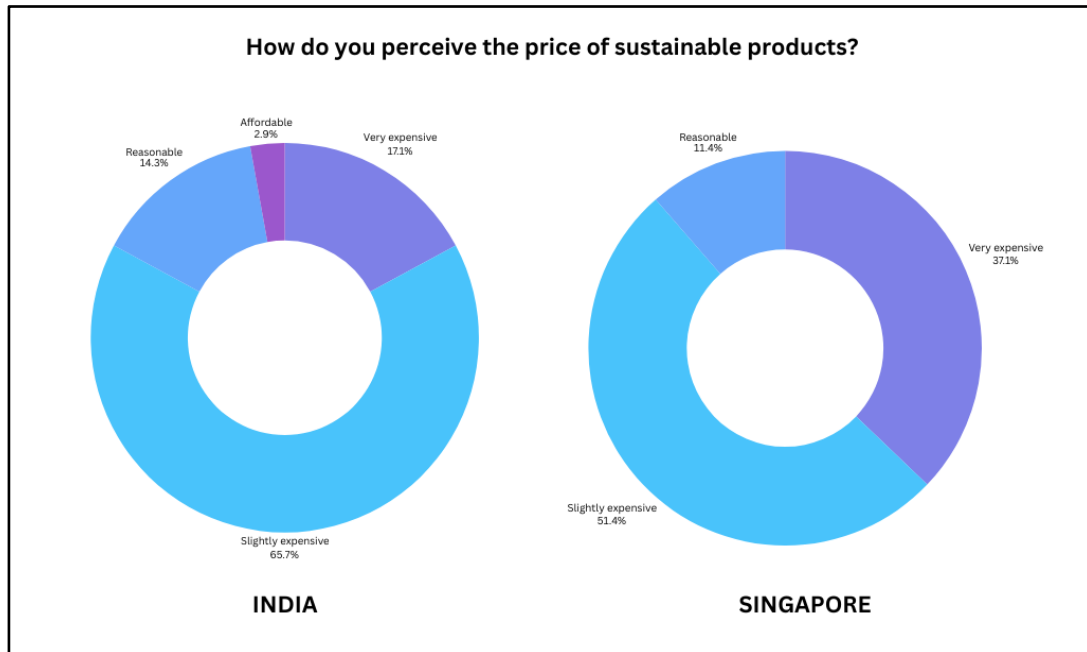
Code 2 - Strong moral valuation (Derived from the following question: *How important is sustainability when making a purchase decision?*)



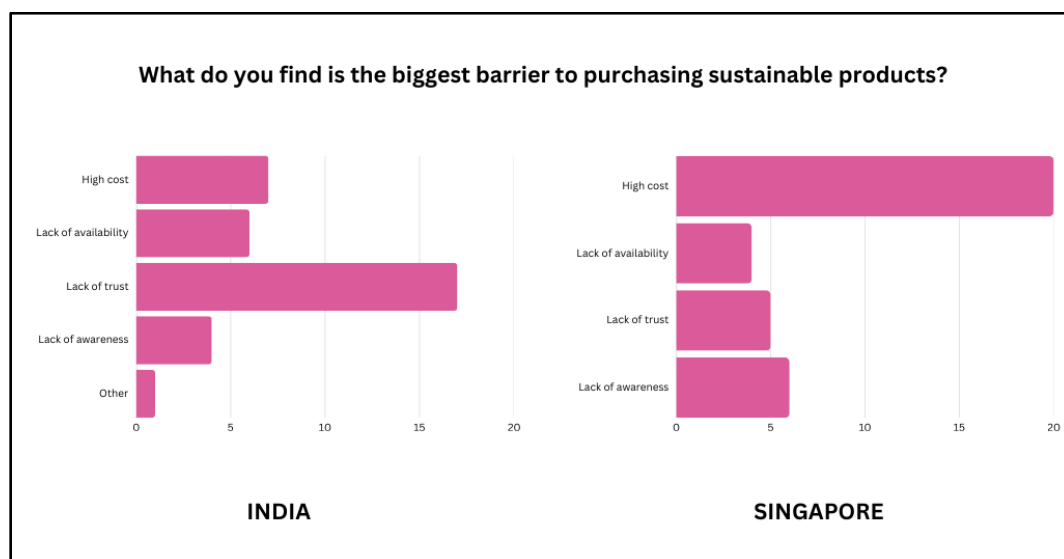
Code 3 - Sustainability as secondary factor (Derived from the following questions: *How important is sustainability when making a purchase decision?* and *Do you actively try to purchase products from sustainable brands?*)



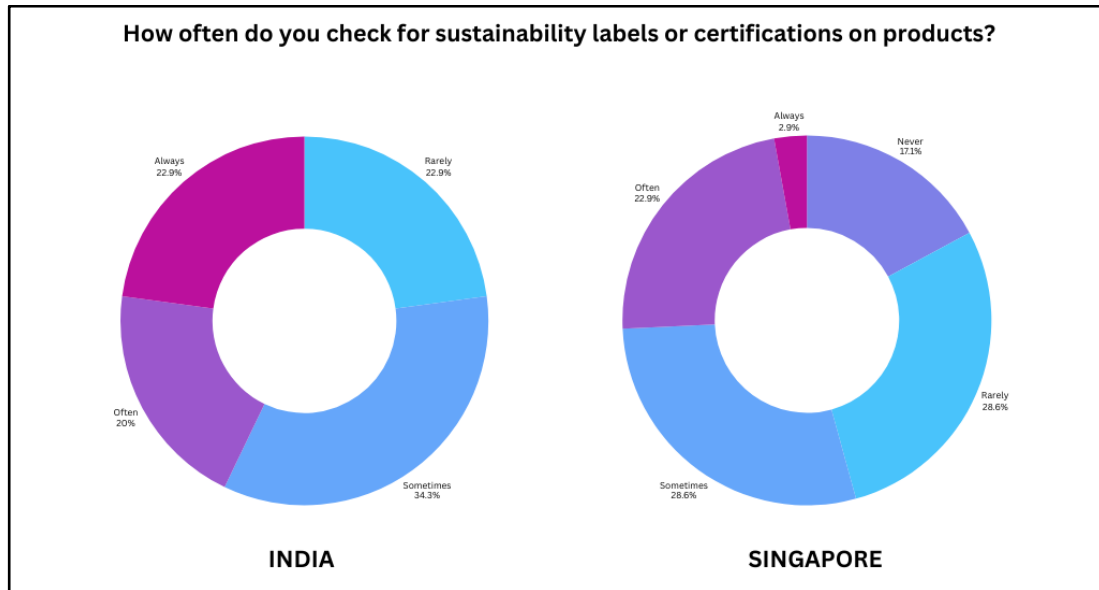
Code 4 - Price sensitivity (Derived from the following questions: What do you find is the biggest barrier to purchasing sustainable products? and How do you perceive the price of sustainable products?)



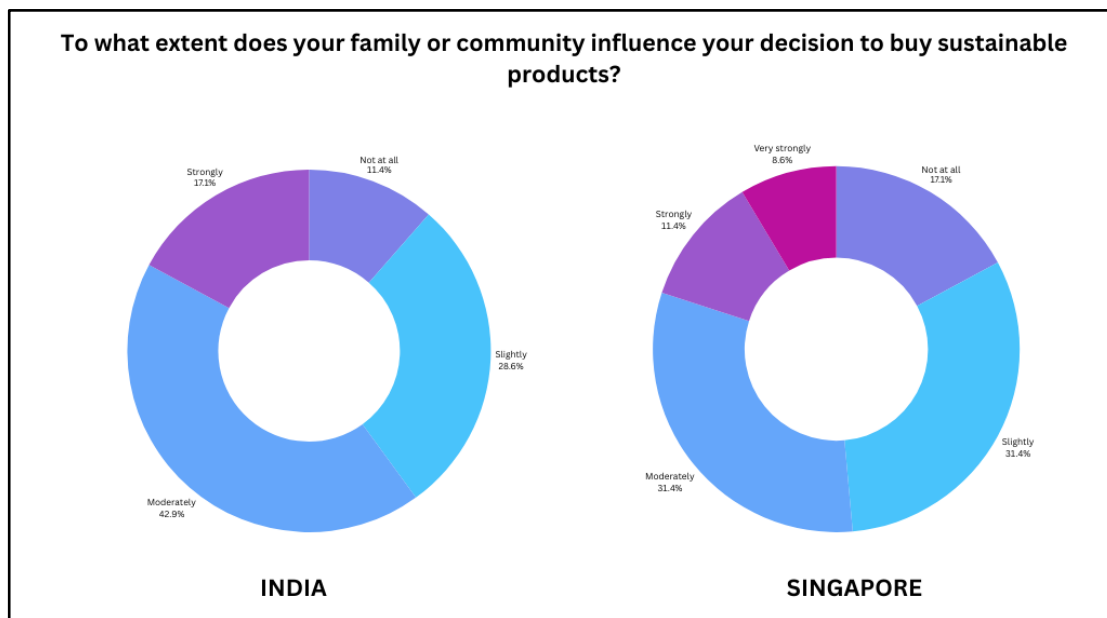
Code 5 - Distrust in sustainability claims (Derived from the following question: What do you find is the biggest barrier to purchasing sustainable products?)



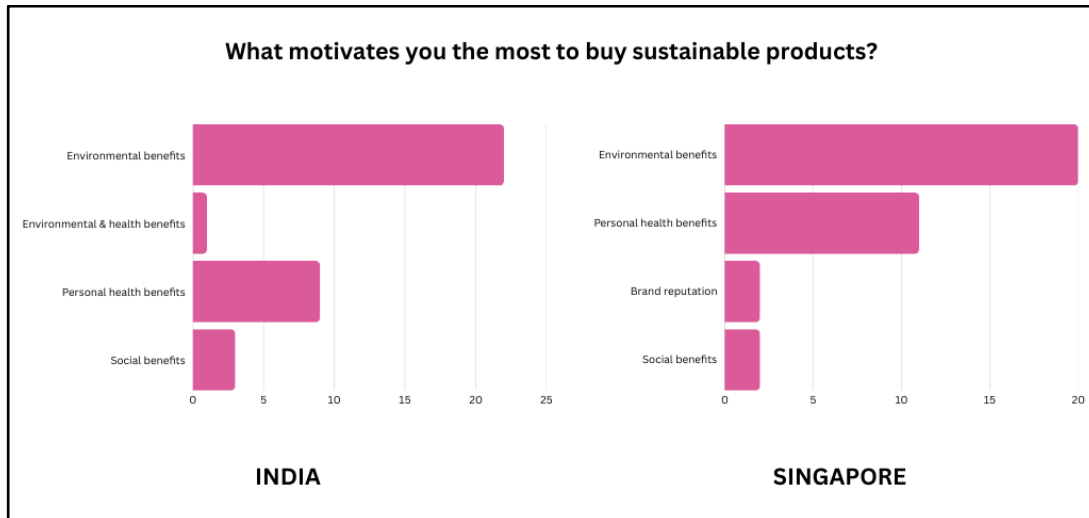
Code 6 - Active Sustainability Verification Behaviour (Derived from the following question: How often do you check for sustainability labels or certifications on products?)



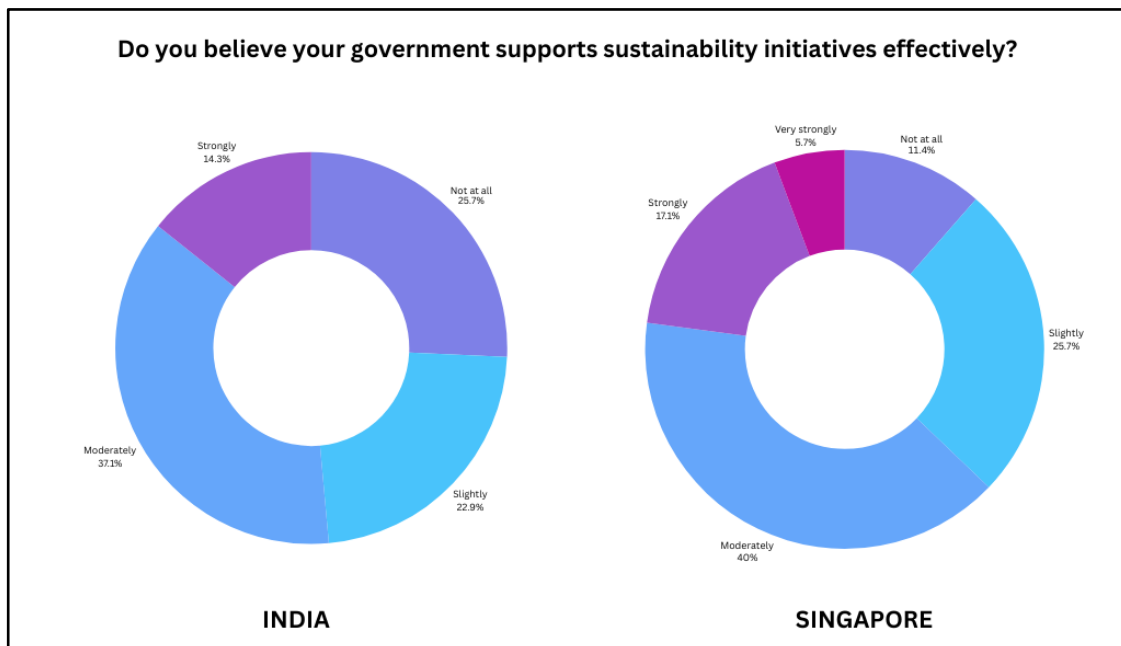
Code 7 - Community and Family Influence and **Code 8 - Individualised Decision-Making** (Derived from the following question: To what extent does your family or community influence your decision to buy sustainable products?)



Code 9 - Environmental Motivation as Primary Driver (Derived from the following question: What motivates you the most to buy sustainable products?)



Code 10 - Conditional Institutional Legitimacy in Sustainability Governance (Derived from the following question: Do you believe your government supports sustainability initiatives effectively?)



Themes

Theme	Code
Theme 1: The Value-Action Gap in Sustainable Consumption	Codes 2, 3
Theme 2: Economic and Credibility Barriers to Sustainable Behaviour	Codes 4, 5, 6
Theme 3: Cultural Structuring of Decision-Making	Code 7, 8
Theme 4: Institutional and Environmental Framing of Sustainability	Code 9, 10

Discussion

This study set out to explore the differences in consumer responses to sustainability between India and Singapore, focusing on economic, cultural and institutional influences. Based on the thematic analysis, four overarching themes were identified: (1) the value-action gap, (2) economic and credibility barriers, (3) cultural structuring of consumer decision-making and (4) institutional and environmental framing of sustainability. These themes provide a structured lens through which the hypotheses can now be evaluated.

H1: Awareness and trust in sustainable products are higher in Singapore than in India.

Analysis of the survey data shows that awareness levels are similarly high in both countries, with 25 out of 35 respondents in each country reporting being 'very familiar' with sustainability (Code 1). This challenges the assumption that higher-income or more developed economies necessarily exhibit greater awareness and aligns with existing literature suggesting that sustainability discourse has become globally mainstreamed.

However, trust in sustainability claims differed substantially: Indian respondents expressed significantly greater skepticism (17/35 citing distrust) than Singapore respondents (5/35). Singaporean consumers, by contrast, reported higher confidence in government campaigns, reflecting stronger institutional trust (Code 10). Based on these findings, H1 is partially supported: while Singapore exceeds India in trust, awareness levels are broadly comparable across both countries.

This distinction reinforces the importance of separating knowledge from credibility in sustainable consumption research and supports critiques of awareness-based interventions that overlook trust and legitimacy as independent determinants of behaviour.

H2: Economic barriers, such as price and access, are more significant in India.

The data reveal an unexpected pattern – Singaporean respondents reported cost as the primary barrier, with 20 out of 35 citing high cost and perceived sustainable products as largely expensive (Code 4). Indian respondents, on the other hand, cited economic barriers less frequently (only 7/35 cited high cost), instead emphasising distrust in sustainability claims.

This finding suggests that economic rationality does not operate uniformly across contexts. In a mature and highly regulated market like Singapore, sustainability is often positioned as a premium attribute, heightening price sensitivity despite higher average income levels. In India, however, concerns around credibility and greenwashing outweigh cost considerations and this leads consumers to engage in verification behaviours (code 6) rather than abandoning sustainable intent altogether. As such, H2 is rejected and the findings underscore the role of market maturity, regulatory credibility and perceived authenticity in shaping behavioural constraints.

H3: Cultural and community influences play a stronger role in India's consumer decision-making

The survey confirms this hypothesis. Indian respondents reported moderate to strong influence from family and community on sustainable purchasing decisions (21/35; code 7), while Singaporean respondents indicated mostly weak influence or individualised decision-making (code 8). This aligns well with Hofstede's cultural dimensions: India's collectivist orientation amplifies social norms, whereas Singapore's individualism promotes autonomous decision-making. This theme also interacts with Codes 2 and 3 (moral valuation versus secondary factor), showing that in India, model commitment is often socially reinforced, while in Singapore, it is filtered through personal cost-benefit considerations. Consequently, H3 is fully supported.

Integration of findings with theoretical frameworks

The value-action gap identified across both countries provides a critical interpretive lens. Despite strong model valuation of sustainability, particularly evident in Singapore, this commitment is not consistently translated into purchasing behaviour. This finding therefore aligns with the VBN theory as well as the Theory of Planned Behaviour, where cost or credibility undermines perceived feasibility, pro-environmental intentions weaken.

This gap is further illuminated through the cognitive dissonance theory. Consumers who recognise sustainability as important yet fail to act experience psychological discomfort, which is resolved differently across contexts. Singaporean consumers may rationalise inaction through price sensitivity, while Indian consumers seek to reduce dissonance by engaging in active verification or scepticism toward sustainability claims.

The theme of economic and credibility barriers highlights how different constraints dominate in each country. Singapore's price sensitivity reflects TBP's emphasis on behavioural control, while India's distrust reflects concerns around greenwashing and regulatory enforcement. Verification behaviours among Indian respondents represent an adaptive strategy rather than disengagement, suggesting conditional rather than absent pro-environmental intent.

Cultural structuring of decision-making reinforces Hofstede's framework, demonstrating how collective norms in India amplify the role of social expectations in shaping sustainable behaviour. In contrast, Singapore's individualistic orientation promotes autonomy but may weaken the normative pressure required to bridge the value-action gap.

Finally, institutional and environmental framing underscores the role of governance and legitimacy. Higher institutional trust in Singapore lends credibility to sustainability campaigns, even if economic barriers limit behavioural uptake. In India, weaker institutional trust necessitates stronger moral or social reinforcement, positioning sustainability as a value-driven rather than institutionally guided behaviour.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine how consumer responses to sustainability differ between India and Singapore and to evaluate the role of cultural and economic factors in shaping these responses. Results indicate that across both Singapore and India, high sustainability awareness does not automatically translate into consistent sustainable purchasing, reinforcing the persistence of a value-action gap. However, the mechanisms that underlie this gap differ meaningfully across contexts. In India, economic constraints are less dominant than anticipated; instead, scepticism towards sustainability claims and concerns about authenticity play a more significant role in limiting behaviour. In Singapore, on the other hand, sustainable consumption is surprisingly constrained by price sensitivity despite strong moral evaluation and relatively higher institutional legitimacy. These contrasting patterns demonstrate that consumer responses to sustainability are shaped not by awareness or income alone but by how economic considerations interact with other variables, including trust, market maturity and cultural norms. The hypothesis testing reflects this complexity: while institutional trust is moderately higher in Singapore, awareness remains comparable across both countries; economic barriers are more pronounced in Singapore than in India; and cultural and community influences exert a substantially stronger effect on Indian consumers. Further integration of behavioural theories clarifies these outcomes, whereby the VBN framework and the Theory of Planned Behaviour explain why model concern must be supported by perceived feasibility to produce action, while cognitive dissonance theory illustrates how consumers rationalise inaction through price or trust. Hofstede's cultural dimensions provide essential contextual grounding, showing how collective norms in India

reinforce socially mediated sustainability values, whereas individualism in Singapore promotes autonomous, cost-benefit-oriented decision-making.

From a practical perspective, these findings carry important implications for policymakers and businesses. In India, strengthening regulatory enforcement and reducing greenwashing might be more effective than price-based incentives in promoting sustainable consumption. In Singapore, addressing affordability and reframing sustainability beyond premium positioning can help narrow the value-action gap. Across both contexts, culturally tailored strategies that recognise the role of social norms and institutional legitimacy are likely to be more effective than uniform sustainability messaging.

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations. The relatively small sample size limits generalisability and the reliance on self-reported data introduces a potential for social desirability bias. Additionally, the cross-sectional design captures attitudes and perceptions at a single point in time rather than behavioural change over time. Future research could employ larger and more diverse samples as well as incorporate longitudinal designs or combine survey data with observational or experimental methods. Further exploration of additional cultural dimension such as long-term orientation and indulgence, could also deepen the understanding of cross-national differences in sustainable consumption.

Overall, the study demonstrates that sustainable consumer behaviour is best understood as a culturally embedded, contextually constrained phenomenon in which economic, psychological and institutional factors interact to shape how sustainability is perceived and enacted across societies.

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