



**Vaasan yliopisto**  
UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

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# **The impact of country of origin to perceived sustainability of a fashion item**

Empirical research to Finnish consumers

School of Marketing and Communication &  
School of Management  
Master's thesis  
Master's Degree Programme in International  
Business

Vaasa 2022

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**ABSTRACT:**

Sustainability has raised its importance and actions related to sustainability can be seen in both consumers and companies' side. Consumers have become more aware of issues related to sustainability and thus are making changes in their behavior. Companies as well are aware of the issues and as an example sustainability reporting has become more common.

In terms of international business, country-of-origin effect is a common research area, and it has been studied related to various industries. Country-of-origin have resulted to both having and not having an influence on consumers, and thus in this research was studied, whether there is a connection with country-of-origin effect and sustainability.

As fashion industry is a large industry with various issues related to sustainability, and there is prior research connecting fashion industry to both country-of-origin effect and sustainability, it was chosen as the industry for the research. There are various issues in the fashion industry both in the consumer-side and the company-side, such as the linear supply chain, the shortness of the product's lifecycle, the speed of the industry and the overconsumption in the industry.

The research was conducted as qualitative research and the target was to find out whether country-of-origin is influencing consumers' views on the sustainability of a fashion item. Through the research it was understood that there is a connection between country-of-origin effect and perceived sustainability. Country of manufacturing had a more influential role in terms how sustainable or unsustainable the fashion item was seen. Also, it was understood that various consumers of the study consider the items sustainable if they are using it in a more sustainable way, such as prolonging the life cycle of the item, by taking care of the product and fixing the product. In addition, second-hand purchases were thought to be a sustainable choice and for various interviewees the first step to consume in a more sustainable way.

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**KEYWORDS:** Sustainability, Country-of-origin effect, Fashion industry

**TIIVISTELMÄ:**

Kestävä kehitys on noussut tärkeäksi teemaksi nykymaailmassa ja kestävä kehityksen tekoja voi nähdä sekä kuluttajien että yritysten puolelta. Kuluttajat ovat tulleet entistä tietoisemmiksi kestävästä kehityksestä, jonka vuoksi käyttäytyminen on myös muuttunut. Yhtä lailla yritykset ovat tietoisia kestävästä kehityksestä ja yrityksiensä puolella esimerkiksi erilaiset Kestävä kehityksen raportit ("Sustainability reporting") ovat yleistyneet.

Kansainvälisen liiketoiminnan saralla, alkuperämaahan liitetty vaikutus ("country-of-origin effect") on yleinen tutkimuksen kohde. Alkuperämaahan liittyvien tutkimuksien lopputuloksena on ollut kahdenlaisia johtopäätöksiä, sekä alkuperämaalla on vaikutus kuluttajiin että sillä ei ole vaikutusta, ja sen vuoksi tässä tutkimuksessa tavoitteena on selvittää, onko alkuperämaalla ja kestävällä kehityksellä yhteys kuluttajien näkökulmasta.

Yksi maailman suurimmista teollisuusaloista on vaateteollisuus, johon liitetään monenlaisia ongelmia kestäväan kehitykseen liittyen. Tämän lisäksi aiemmissa tutkimuksissa vaateteollisuus on yhdistetty sekä kestäväan kehityksen teemoihin että alkuperämaan vaikutusta kuluttajiin vaateteollisuuteen on tutkittu. Vaateteollisuuteen liittyi useita ongelmia kestäväan kehityksen kannalta sekä kuluttajien että yritysten puolelta, kuten lineaarinen toimitusketju, jättäen toimitusketjun lopun 'avoimeksi', tuotteen elinkaaren lyhyys, vaateteollisuuden nopeus ja ylikuluttaminen.

Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena, ja sen tavoitteena oli selvittää, onko alkuperämaalla vaikutusta kuluttajien näkemykseen vaateen vastuullisuudesta. Tutkimuksen kautta selvisi, että alkuperämaalla on vaikutusta siihen, miten vastuullisena tuote nähdään. Tuotteen valmistusmaalla oli suurempi vaikutus kuin vastuullisena tai ei-vastuullisena tuote nähdään verrattuna tuotteen brändin alkuperämaan vaikutukseen. Lisäksi tutkimus selvensi kuluttajien näkemystä vastuullisesta tuotteesta, sillä kuluttajat mainitsivat omien tekojen vaikuttavan tuotteen vastuullisuuteen, kuten tuotteen elinkaaren pidentäminen pitämällä tuotteesta huolta tai korjaamalla sitä. Kuluttajat myös pitivät käytettyjen vaatteiden ostamista vastuullisena valintana ja monissa haastatteluissa tuli ilmi, kuinka se on heidän silmissään ensimmäinen askel vastuulliseen kuluttamiseen.

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# 1 Introduction

The introductory chapter gives insight on the background on the study, following with how the study topic is relevant. Additionally, limitations of the study are discussed as well as the essential concepts. The final chapter goes through the structure of the thesis.

## 1.1 Background of the study

Sustainability is a trend in today's world. This is due to the fact, that climate change is a current issue in our world, and actions are needed in order to tackle climate change. Sustainability has also raised its importance and both companies and consumers do actions related to being more sustainable. Climate change is referring to the warming of the Globe, which has resulted over the years due to using fossil fuels. Climate change is concerning the whole planet in different ways, and it may result to warmer climate, melting of the polar ice, rise of the sea levels, and flooding as an example. The way to tackle these undesirable outcomes, changes need to be made, such as decreasing emissions. Various countries have agreed on lowering the emissions and are aiming towards "net zero emissions by 2050". (United Nations, 2021a) As these topics are current in our world and are visible in both domestic and international media, people are increasingly starting to be aware of these issues. Hence, companies are forced to apply sustainability-related actions in their operations. (Bartels, Reinders, & Van Haaster-De Winter, 2015)

United Nations have developed "Sustainable Development Goals" which includes 17 different goals, related to sustainability in three areas: environmental, economic, and social. Companies can therefore, in addition to tackling the climate change, utilize these 17 goals in order to become more sustainable in their actions. (United Nations, 2021b)

Furthermore, country of origin is a widely studied topic in international business. There are differing views on whether country of origin is impacting consumers (Bhaskaran & Sukumaran, 2007) or not (Lim, Darley, & Summers, 1994; Godey, et al., 2012). In addition, Hollensen (2020, p. 473), state the country of origin having a larger impact on the

product than the brand itself. There also have been studies related to perceived country of origin, concluding to it also having an effect on the perception of the brand, regardless is the perceived country of origin correct. (Magnusson, Westjohn & Zdravkovic, 2011)

According to various researchers, country of origin has an impact on the perception of the brand, brand image and purchase intention, and it is involved in the process of creating an image of the quality of the product. (Han, 1989; Ha-Brookshire & Yoon, 2012) Country image is also said to influence consumers' view of the items (Roth & Romeo, 1992). The reason why country of origin may affect the perceived quality, is that some countries are having a better or poorer reputation in terms of quality of specific products (Hollensen, 2020, p. 473). If the sold product is good, but people have poor experiences of the country or the brand itself has a poor reputation, the product is not thought as good (Hollensen, 2020, p. 474).

As both sustainability and country of origin are relevant study fields, there is a need to study whether there is a connection between these two topics. As there is proof of country of origin influencing consumers opinions and views of a product and its quality (Han, 1989; Ha-Brookshire & Yoon, 2012), in the study will be examined whether country of origin has an influence on sustainability.

Fashion industry is a well-researched industry, and there are previous studies connecting the fashion industry to both country of origin and sustainability (Esmailpour & Abdolvand, 2016; Kim & Chun, 2017; Fung, Choi & Liu, 2020; Park, & Kim, 2016; Zhang, Zhang, & Zhou, 2021; Patwa, & Seetharaman, 2019). To continue the previously made studies, this research is going to examine the country of origin's influence on perceived sustainability related to clothing items.

## **1.2 Research question and objectives**

The research is examining consumer's perceptions of the sustainability aspect of a clothing item. Furthermore, the research will study whether there is a connection between



country of origin and sustainability, specifically related to clothing items. As there are previous studies connecting the fashion industry to both country of origin and sustainability (Esmailpour & Abdolvand, 2016; Kim & Chun, 2017; Fung, Choi & Liu, 2020; Park, & Kim, 2016; Zhang, Zhang, & Zhou, 2021; Patwa, & Seetharaman, 2019) the study will focus on this industry.

Previous research related to sustainability have considered one or two aspects of sustainability, and thus in this study, all the aspects will not be considered either. Sustainability is commonly divided to three major aspects: environmental, economic, and social sustainability (Robertson, 2014). This study is concentrating on two of these aspects: environmental and social since these can be considered to be essential related to manufacturing a clothing item. The study is concentrating to finding out whether country of origin is impacting consumers' views related to the clothing item's sustainability. As country of origin has various meanings, it is needed to limit the meanings of country of origin. The study will cover both the country of origin of the brand and the manufacturing country, and it will be studied whether one of them is more influential towards sustainability. Since there is no direct prior research connecting the country-of-origin factors and sustainability, this research will examine whether there is a connection between country of origin to the perceived sustainability. Thus, the research questions being:

*“How is country of origin influencing consumer's perception of sustainability of clothing items?”*

As prior research has utilized categorization as a defining element and to make the research simpler, the same concept is utilized in the future research (Tseng & Balabanis, 2011; Kock et al., 2019). Therefore, the chosen product category is a clothing item. The idea is that the research is concentrating on consumer's perceptions related to a specific product category, such as clothing. The conducted research will then conclude whether the chosen factors are influencing consumers perception of sustainability and how the factors are influencing consumers in the chosen product category.

The objectives of the research are to gain understanding on sustainability and country-of-origin effect and what kind of connection these topics have with fashion industry. Through the empirical research will be studied how sustainability and country-of-origin are linked in the minds of consumers.

### **1.3 Delimitations of the study**

The study is focused on the country of origin and its influence on Finnish consumer's perceived sustainability related to a clothing item. Thus, the study is limiting the research to only clothing items and leaving other fields aside.

The research is concentrating on Finnish consumers' and their perceptions, which is limiting the research to be generalised to all other nationalities. The target group of the study will be limited to people who concentrate on sustainable values when making clothing purchases and having an interest towards sustainability in terms of clothing. The target group of the study will also be limited by age, to create more reliable results for the study. The target group is limited to 20–30-year-olds. This age group is chosen in regards hoping they would have similar level of knowledge level on sustainability and country of origin effect as a concept. They have been educated rather similarly, compared to elderly people, who are most likely having different views on country-of-origin effect.

Additionally, the research will be made as a qualitative study, which is also affecting the generalisability of the results. However, the qualitative method is generating deeper understanding on the consumers and their views related to this topic.

### **1.4 Definitions of key concepts**

Sustainability refers to sustainable actions which are done based on three aspects of sustainability: environmental, economic, and social. (Robertson, 2014) Sustainable

development is another essential term. Sustainable development is such action where the needs of current generations are met without jeopardizing “the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

Sustainability is a key concept in today’s business world. In our world we are encountering climate change, inequality among people, humanitarian crises as well as environmental crises (Brandt, Ernst, Gralla, Luederitz, Lang, Newig, Reinert, Abson, & Von Wehrden, 2013). As sustainability has a broad definition, sustainability is divided to three different dimensions to clearly state the different aspects of it. The three dimensions of sustainability or the so-called triple bottom line defines sustainability through three pillars, which are environmental, economic, and social sustainability (Robertson, 2014). According to Goodland (1995) economic sustainability is related to the growth of companies but keeping in mind the aspect of sustainable development. Companies should consider natural resources and the consumption of the resources. Social sustainability is more considering the human nature, and to be more exact the different issues related to it. As an example, poverty is a huge issue among us, and it is also one of the key points of social sustainability. And lastly, the environmental sustainability takes into consideration the nature aspect. Environmental sustainability is considering both production and consumption of natural resources. (Goodland, 1995)

Definition of country of origin according to Roth and Romeo (1992) is “the overall perception consumers form of products from a particular country, based on their prior perceptions of the country’s production and marketing strengths and weaknesses”. Country of origin, also referred to as COO, is the label presenting the fact where the product is manufactured. (Hollensen, 2020, p. 473)

Country of origin is also not only one term, but it can be divided to various other terms. Country of origin does not always tell everything, and various products nowadays are assembled with parts that are coming from various parts of the world. Therefore, various

products that are sold today, are multinational products. The different country of origin terms are the following; country of parts (COP), meaning the origin of the parts that the final product is then assembled of, country of manufacturing (COM), country of brand (COB) and country of design (COD). For consumers, the country of manufacturing is influential, and consumers wish to be informed of it. Country of manufacturing helps consumers create an image of the product and of the safety of the product. (Ha-Brookshire & Yoon, 2012)

## **1.5 Structure of the thesis**

In the following two chapters the theoretical background of the research will be covered, including sustainability and country of origin, followed by the methodology for the study. The fifth chapter concentrates on the done research and analyzing the data and discussion on the results, and finally ending with conclusion.

## 2 Sustainability

Sustainability is well-connected to the current time, due to different environmental crises, global warming, different social issues such as poverty and child labour, and the Paris climate agreement being part of media. Sustainability has raised its importance in the last few years in various industries (Bom, Ribeiro & Marto, 2019). In the current literature, sustainability is connected to various topics, such as food (Lang & Barling, 2012), fashion (Fung, Choi & Liu, 2020; Patwa & Seetharaman, 2019; Park & Kim, 2016), cosmetics, (Bom, Ribeiro & Marto, 2019) and generally comparing consumerism and sustainability.

### 2.1 Consumption

Increasingly, consumption society has lifted its head in our world, and the issues of the current consumption-based society, is the fact that our planet cannot manage with the current consumption. (Wiedmann, Lenzen, Keyßer, & Steinberger, 2020) Increasingly, there are consumers who have already realised this and are decreasing their consumption and taking their time considering which items they really need, and which would be the best alternatives for our planet. However, when the society is in recession and close to economic crises, consumers are asked to consume in order for the economy to manage with the recession and that the economy will have the change to recover, which then is not helping consumer to realise the problem with consuming. Additionally, this encouragement towards consumption is not the way towards a sustainable society. (Solomon, Askegaard, Hogg, & Bamossy, 2019)

The consumers who are aware on the outcomes their consumption, are usually called ethical consumers. These people are the ones that wishes to make better choices in terms of consumption. (Harrison, et al., 2007) These consumers have realised that by leaving some products to the store, or even boycotting some brands, they can influence the company's turnover and thus, decide to support companies that are sharing similar values with themselves. (Solomon, et al., 2019; Andorfer & Liebe, 2015; Akehurst, Afonso, Gonçalves, 2012) The difficulty for the consumer comes when they start to evaluate the

companies and decides which companies to trust and which to not trust. What makes this evaluation process difficult is the fact, that the production processes have become complex, and therefore the consumer cannot be entire sure of the supply chain and all the processes it includes. Additionally, there are different labels and claims introduced in the products, of which the consumer cannot know, which ones to trust. To conclude, in today's world it is not easy for the consumer to evaluate the products and evaluate what the consequences of buying the particular product can be. (Hassan, Shaw, Shiu, Walsh & Parry, 2013)

According to a study made by Joshi and Rahman (2019), the consumers who are willing to be environmentally responsible, are most like to consume sustainably. Also, consumers, who believe that their actions matter in tackling the climate change, are also making sustainable purchasing decisions. In order for being able to tackle the climate change and make decision towards a better and healthier planet, sustainable actions are required. Being sustainable should not only be an advertisable concept, but it should become the normal way of living and consuming. (Joshi & Rahman, 2019)

## **2.2 Sustainability and consumers**

What comes to sustainability and consumers, there are issues related to consumer's views on sustainability and their behaviour. According to White, Hardisty, and Habib (2019), people are expressing positive views towards sustainable products and services but regardless their positive thoughts, they choose not to buy them but are rather choosing a product without the sustainability aspect and with a lower price for example. Additionally, according to a study made by Bonini and Oppenheim (2008) revealed that 87 % of the respondents of the study think that their consumption is affecting the environmental crises. However, when asked, who are buying or have bought products that would be better for the planet, only a third of the respondents answered having done so.

In the food industry, the sustainability attributes of beef have been evaluated. On the study made by Burnier, Spers and Barcellos (2021) they found out that the safety of a food is an essential influential factor on consumers. Also, the brand is a factor that is influencing consumers, as in various other fields as well. It was noted in the study, that expressing the emissions of raising the beef, might influence consumers and their behaviour as well, but it is not doing that much at the moment. Companies should express the emissions on the beef package, and it should be part of the communications of the company. Animal welfare would be also an important part to add to marketing and communications. (Burnier, Spers & Barcellos, 2021)

Staples, Reeling, Widmar and Lusk (2020) found through their research, that 75 % of the respondents in their study are ready to pay a little extra for environmentally sustainable beer. Many brewers are investing and are interested in investing in machinery that is more sustainable, and therefore is also benefitting the company, as they are saving in different costs related to the business, such as energy savings etc. The 75 % of respondents who can invest more in beer, were younger people and people who were wealthier than an average respondent. (Staples, Reeling, Widmar & Lusk, 2020)

Also, the consumption behaviour related to food waste and consumption of Finnish consumers have been studied. The study was focusing on generation Z consumers, thus concentrating on consumers aged 17–26-year-olds. The study resulted to gaining understanding on consumers views related to food waste and consumption. The consumers had the idea that their decisions and behaviour can make a difference, which then can impact the consumers to behave in a more sustainable way. However, the economic stability or the absence of it, was preventing these consumers to always act according to their values. (Kymäläinen, Seisto & Malila, 2021)

The knowledge and understanding related to sustainability have been studied also outside Western societies, and in this particular research, in Kyrgyzstan. Resulting to finding out, that people are not that aware of sustainability-related issues than in most of the

Western countries. One of the main reasons was that the society itself is not emphasizing sustainability as an essential and sustainability is not that visible in media as an example. In addition, the society is not providing all the basis for the citizens to be sustainable, such as the possibility to recycle. (Shadymanova, Wahlen, van der Horst, 2014)

Sustainability as a desirable attribute has risen its importance in the cosmetics industry as well. Generally, the words “natural”, “organic”, and “green” are the type that consumers are connecting to sustainability. Although, these words alone cannot guarantee that a product is sustainable. (Bom, Ribeiro, & Marto, 2019)

Research made by Andorfer and Liebe (2015) studied which factors are increasing fair trade consumption. The influencing factors used in this research, was increasing knowledge by an information paper close to the products, appealing to consumers’ morality on how important it is to support fair trade products, and lastly a price decrease of 20 %. The decreased price was the one that increased the sales the most. (Andordfer & Liebe, 2015) Which supports the statement, that people rather are paying less than more of a product (Andordfer & Liebe, 2015; Diamantopoulos, Matarazzo, Montanari & Petrychenko, 2021).

According to the research made by Bonini and Oppenheim (2008), there is a market for green products. The supporting facts are that third of the respondents of the study could pay a little extra for these products, and over half of the respondents are worried about the environment and want to be part of making the actions to help the environment. Additionally, consumers should be educated on the benefits of consuming green products and about the quality of these products. As consumers are waiting for companies to do their part and help them to make better choices, the companies cannot do everything by themselves, but in order to move towards a more sustainable society, the help of government would be needed. (Bonini & Oppenheim, 2008)



In the research field of sustainability, there are various studies made, and there are studies on what the perceived sustainability is affecting on and what is affecting the perceived sustainability. As an example, an article by Chen, Sun, Yan, and Wen (2020) is concentrating on how perceived sustainability of a fashion item is affecting customer engagement on the clothing brand. The conclusion was that when a customer is perceiving sustainability, it increases the consumer's engagement with the brand. (Chen, et al., 2020) Green marketing is a big actor how consumer's views are being influenced by companies. When marketers are advertising a product or a brand being sustainable or environmentally friendly, consumers are mostly trusting the marketing. Green brands may create positive reactions in consumers, and they might be willing to buy the product due to the marketing. But the reasons for buying a green product might not be the sustainability, but to make themselves feel better for making such a purchase decision. (Hartmann & Ibanez, 2006)

Even though green marketing is seen as good, and it influences consumers towards to greener consumption, it also has its issues. The focus of green marketing is to market green products and emphasize the sustainability or environmental-friendly aspects to consumers, and therefore the products may seem more acceptable to consume. But, overall, the problem in our time is consumption, and in most cases, green marketing is still emphasizing consumers to consumption. For this reason, the green marketing cannot be a totally acceptable sustainable tool. (Choi & Ng, 2011)

### **2.3 Sustainability in the fashion industry**

The fashion industry is one of the largest industries in the world with a revenue of \$ 2.4 trillion. (United Nations, 2021a) As fashion industry is one of the largest, it has its role for emissions and consumed water. Fashion industry is to blame for 2-8 % of the world's greenhouse gas emissions and consuming 215 trillion litres of water per year. (United Nations, 2021b) The fashion industry has also been blamed for not recycling and therefore losing a lot of usable material (Horne, 2012) and according to United Nations (2021), the material loss annually is valued to \$ 100 billion. According to UN (2019), fashion

industry is the second most polluting industry in the world. The industry creates a lot of carbon emissions, and the trend of fast fashion is influencing on the frequency of purchases. (UN, 2019)

As the fashion industry has a large impact on the world, it is a great actor in achieving the United Nations' 50 Sustainable Development Goals. (United Nations, 2021) The net-zero on greenhouse gas emissions for fashion industry is aimed to 2050, in order to keep the global warming below 1.5 degrees. (United Nations, Climate Change, 2021)

Even though it was mentioned previously that triple bottom line is explaining different aspects of sustainability well but does not provide explanation on how to measure sustainability of an item, it can explain the perception of sustainability the consumers have of a brand. In this case, the triple bottom line can be used as a measuring tool. (Park & Kim, 2016a)

According to Park and Kim (2016b) there are differences in the sustainability aspect of fast fashion brands compared to sustainable fashion brands. The motive for fast fashion brands is to appear good in the eyes of more sustainable consumers and get their attention and get them to purchase the products. Compared to sustainable fashion brands, who are actively trying to change the fashion industry towards more sustainable direction.

Park & Kim (2016a) stated that many people are sustainably conscious, thus they are choosing to consume fast-fashion products. The reasons for this are for example, that people are wishing to have the products fast-fashion is manufacturing and those products are easily and quickly reachable. Also, many people may not afford high-fashion items. Lastly, even though people are conscious of the importance of sustainability, they are not aware of how broad the impact of manufacturing and consuming fast fashion is, and therefore choose to consume fast fashion. (Park & Kim, 2016a)

The research made by Park and Kim (2016a) resulted that sustainability of a brand does not create that brand loyalty and brand trust on the consumers' side. In more detail, there were some differences inside the triple bottom line of sustainability. The environmental aspect of sustainability, which various companies are concentrating their effort and marketing, did not create increased brand trust or brand loyalty alone. However, brand's economic sustainability indicates some increase in brand trust and brand loyalty. Lastly, related to the social sustainability, it did not increase the results either since consumers mostly have a negative view related to social sustainability and fashion brands. Thus, the consumers do not trust the statements related to social sustainability. (Park & Kim, 2016a)

Zhang, Zhang & Zhou (2021) made research where they were studying UK consumers and trying to understand their viewpoints on fast fashion's sustainability. The research was conducted in the United Kingdom since British consumers are consuming fashion apparel more than any other European country, resulting to 26.7 kilograms per person per year (European Clothing Action Plan [ECAP], 2018). Due to these numbers, the whole industry is growing more than an average industry in the UK, which is one of the reasons, they chose to concentrate on British consumers' views on sustainability. The research resulted to both genders being ready to pay a little extra on sustainable fast fashion but currently males are the ones who buy more sustainable fast fashion products. Through the study was also found out that for female consumers the issues regarding child labour and environmental issues were big concerns while for male consumer concentrated most on the social equality. (Zhang, Zhang & Zhou, 2021)

Fast fashion is a large industry, and therefore its influence on the economy and sustainability-related issues is great. Even though, there is talk about going to more sustainable direction in the fashion industry, it is still very far from that, and it will take a lot of time before fashion industry becomes sustainable. (Lee, Ha-Brookshire & Chow, 2018) However, according to Patwa and Seetharaman (2019) economically speaking, the change to

circular economy in the fashion industry would be possible, and after the change, the companies would still make a profit.

As previously mentioned, the textile industry is generally categorized as linear economy, but in the past few years, new innovations have risen in the industry, which is guiding the industry towards circular economy. The innovations are in the field of services in the textile industry, such as rental opportunities and resale markets. (Patwa & Seetharaman, 2019)

A study made by Clancy, Fröling, and Peters (2015) showed that the three companies that were part of the study have different views on their consumers and consumption habits related to sustainable products. Two of these companies were in the belief that the sustainable product needs to be within the same price range as the so-called “normal” product, in order for the consumer to purchase it. While the third company thought that the sustainability attribute is something the consumer would be willing to pay a little extra in order to support this sort of action.

Through globalization and the increased awareness of social and environmental issues of consumers, the companies have been forced to look into their supply chains by the society. Nowadays, various companies are reporting their actions yearly to support good manners in terms of supply chains and considering their whole operations. (Turker & Altuntas, 2014)

Through the study, they found out that many companies have code of conducts for their suppliers they expect the companies to commit to. Through having a code of conduct for suppliers, the companies rely on having less risks as well as to support superior operations from the supplier. The code of conduct is built to guide the suppliers and includes values that are important to the company itself. Additionally, it is possible to enhance sustainability aspects through the code of conduct. (Turker & Altuntas, 2014)

The study made by Turker and Altuntas (2014) revealed that companies are valuing relationship with the suppliers. Companies aim to get long-term partnerships with the suppliers to create trust between them. To being able to create trust and a good relationship between the company and the suppliers, communication is essentially needed. (Turker & Altuntas, 2014)

How the fashion industry could become better at their reporting, is for the whole industry to standardize their code of conducts and having a clear vision for sustainable supply chain management. (Turker & Altuntas, 2014)

The study made by Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang and Chan (2012) concentrated on how sustainability is seen as part of people's lives. According to the study, various people were concerned about sustainability and issues related to it. These people were making better decisions for the environment, such as recycling, washing full loads, and thinking about electricity consumption. However, these people did not consider buying fast fashion a bad decision, and some were even buying fast fashion items frequently, as fashion and clothes were important for them.

Joy et al. (2012) state that consumers are after luxury fashion, and due to its expensive price, consumers are satisfied with other products that are not as sustainable or as good quality and as they choose items with the appearance and decent price as the most important aspects. In the study became clear that slow fashion or eco-fashion is not seen as interesting, or the selection is not broad, and the appearance of the items is not pleasing, and therefore people are choosing to consume fast fashion.

Joy et al. (2012) see the possibility of luxury fashion becoming front-runner in the sustainability field. Luxury fashion is concentrating on the quality and designing clothes that last and are timeless.

In various cases fast fashion is seen as a substitute for luxury fashion, and for various people this is the way it is. When considering this comparison more deeply, luxury fashion has different values underneath. Ethical standards are an important part of luxury fashion, and the sourcing process as an example has high ethical standards. In addition, repair services are part of luxury fashion companies' operations. (Joy et al., 2012)

The current world needs the change to going towards sustainable consumption. This requires the attention of especially younger people, and that way decrease of impulse purchases and starting to think longer-term in fashion as well. (Joy et al., 2012) On the contrary of anti-consumerism and people having sustainable values is a trend of impulse buying and the rise of ultra-fast fashion. A study made by Djafarova and Bowes (2021) is studying the buying behavior of young British people through Instagram. As a background, the people who belong to generation Z, requires fast actions in various activities, and demand is no different, when it comes to fashion. According to the study, females of Generation Z are exposed to the influence of Instagram's marketing and thus, to impulse purchasing. (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021) To support the impulse buying behavior, there has been research which resulted that British people spend on average 200 pounds per month to impulse purchases, including fashion purchases, resulting nearly 150 000 pounds during a lifetime (Hall, 2018)

### **2.3.1 Environmental sustainability**

To dive into the different aspects of sustainability, let's first concentrate on the environmental side. Environmental aspect of sustainability in the fashion industry is referring to making decisions while keeping the environment in mind and trying to reduce waste and emissions created in the process of manufacturing and logistics. (Park & Kim, 2016a)

One of the biggest issues related to fashion industry is the open-ended system, also known as the linear supply chain. In the fashion industry, the process usually starts from acquiring the material for the product, manufacturing the product and then after using the product they will be waste ending up to landfills. (Fung, Choi & Liu, 2020; Patwa &

Seetharaman, 2019). Therefore, it can be said, that the current process is creating unnecessary waste, which influences the sustainability aspect of fashion industry on a decreasing way. Recycling is not playing such a big role in the fashion industry at the moment, and if it were to be added to the process, it would become closed-end system, which would transfer the fashion industry closer to circular economy model. (Fung, Choi & Liu, 2020) The change to circular economy model would be a solution or at least an improvement regarding the unnecessary waste that is born in the industry. (Patwa & Seetharaman, 2019)

An issue, that is making it difficult for fashion industry to be sustainable, is the fact that the manufacturing and different actions related to preparing the items are locating in different parts of the world. The raw materials and preparing the materials to fabric and manufacturing the product can all happen in different countries, which is also making the supply chain complex. The complexity of the supply chain and different functions locating in different countries, is also adding the cost for logistics, both financially and for the environment. (Fung, Choi, Liu, 2020)

Another solution for creating the fast fashion a more sustainable industry, is to bring recycling closer to the businesses than it is now. In case of a broken clothing item, the initial step is to repair the item in order for being able to use the product again. Second option is to manufacture the item again, and third option is to recycle the material and make something new of the material and only the last option is to toss the item away to landfills etc. (Patwa & Seetharaman, 2019)

Going towards circular economy is vital due the current situation of the planet. The population is increasing every day and the resources are limited, and therefore the possibility to fulfil everyone's needs it is crucial to cut the waste that is created and reuse the material that has already been manufactured. (Patwa & Seetharaman, 2019)

### **2.3.2 Social sustainability**

The social dimension is related to keeping in mind the societies and communities involved in the complex process of creating and manufacturing fashion. (Park & Kim, 2016a) Specifically in the fashion industry, the social aspect is related to ethical procedures such as promising to not use child labour and making sure that all the employees are receiving a living wage (Fulton & Lee, 2013).

A study made by Turker and Altuntas (2014) studied sustainability of fast fashion companies through corporate reports. As in today's globalized world, there are countless options as suppliers in various parts of the world, it has become more challenging for companies to keep track and observe the whole supply chain and control the quality of the pieces. A few decades back, some bigger companies were still manufacturing items in Europe, but through globalization, companies have transferred various operations to developing countries to being able to cut on costs. (Turker & Altuntas, 2014; Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang & Chan, 2012) Having operations in developing countries does not ease the complexity of the supply chain, and in general the social and environmental conditions are worse for suppliers in developing countries compared to suppliers in developed countries. (Turker & Altuntas, 2014) Today, companies are under observation by stakeholders, such as media and customers, related to labor practices in developing countries. (Mani, Gunasekaran & Delgado, 2018)

## **2.4 Sustainability attributes**

The Triple Bottom Line is a common way to explain the different aspects of sustainability. The triple bottom line is built on environmental, economic, and social sustainability. Even though this term explains sustainability well, it does not give practical ways to measure the sustainability of a brand or a product, and that is something that various industries would need in order to for consumers to understand that the companies actually are or are not sustainable. (Fung, Choi & Liu, 2020)



According to Park and Kim (2016a) there is not a clear and general definition of sustainability in the fashion industry. As there is not a clear definition for sustainability, it makes it difficult to consumers to evaluate fashion items and brands as well if they are interested in consuming sustainable items. In addition, it is difficult for companies to show that they are sustainable, as there are no clear rules on what is sustainable. (Park & Kim, 2016a)

One method to evaluate the sustainability aspect of a product is to use life cycle assessment (LCA). The life cycle assessment takes into consideration the whole process from acquiring the material to what happens to the product after it is no longer used, for example recycling and finally the way it is disposed. LCA concentrates on the environmental side of sustainability and therefore is reflecting the environmental influences of the used resources. The LCA method can help companies to follow the UN's Sustainable Development Goal number 13. (International Organisation for Standardisation [ISO], 2016)

Life Cycle Assessment have been used in fashion industry as well. Zamani, Sandin and Peters (2017) have created a simple scenario of LCA in terms of fashion industry. This explanation of fashion LCA can be seen below in figure 2.

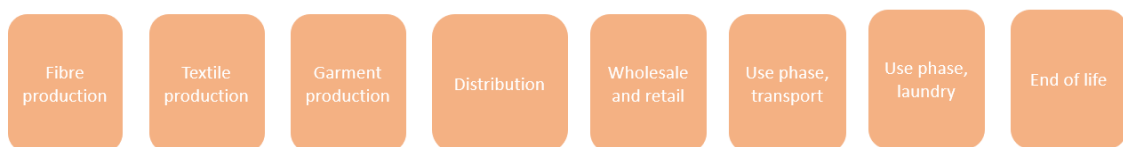


Figure 1: Life Cycle Assessment of garment (Zamani, Sandin & Peters, 2017)

Additionally, the same study made by Zamani, Sandin and Peters (2017) concentrated on whether a collaborative consumption is a better choice for consuming fast fashion in terms of environmental impact. Resulting to the fact that it most likely will influence positively to the environmental impact because of manufacturing reduces, however, the logistical resources it takes in the collaborative consumption circle to get the item back from consumer to another, can turn the advantages to disadvantages. There are

differences in the life cycle of a collaborative consumption compared to a normal consumption behaviour around clothing items. Below, in figure 3 can be seen the life cycle assessment of this collaborative consumption. (Zamani, Sandin & Peters, 2017)

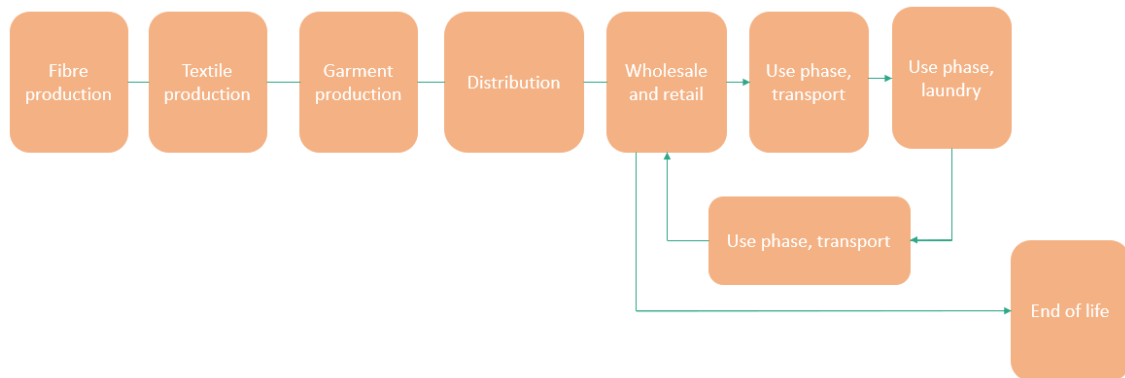


Figure 2: Life Cycle Assessment of Collaborative Consumption (Zamani, Sandin & Peters, 2017)

Ecolabels are used in various industries, such as textile, cosmetics and food. “Ecolabel Index” is an actor in the field, which is providing 455 ecolabels in total. Of these 455, 107 ecolabels are connected to the textile industry. (Ranasinghe & Jayasooriya, 2021) A study made in the Swedish market concludes that the ecolabels are not explaining the sustainability of the item throughout the life cycle but is concentrating on the upstream part of the production. (Clancy, Fröling, & Peters, 2015)

In terms of finding out whether a brand is sustainable, there is an independent actor in the field, called Good on You. This independent actor is rating various brands, which then helps consumers to see whether a brand is doing good in terms of sustainability or not. According to Good on You, one of the greatest issues is that the brand’s lack of transparency when it comes to making promises on being more sustainable. Thus, on paper being sustainable can turn into greenwashing, if there is not clear indication on how the company is being sustainable and decreasing CO2 emissions as an example. (Good on You, 2021)

Overall, there are general issues related to fashion industry. One of the biggest issues is the fact, that fashion industry utilizes the linear supply chain, which is leaving the end of the supply chain open, which in practice means that the clothing items ends up at landfills and a lot of waste. The whole industry should move towards the circular economy, which would decrease the amount of unnecessary waste that is now born in the industry. (Fung, Choi & Liu, 2020; Patwa & Seetharaman, 2019)

### 3 Country of origin

Definition of country of origin according to Roth and Romeo (1992) is “the overall perception consumers form of products from a particular country, based on their prior perceptions of the country’s production and marketing strengths and weaknesses”.

Country of origin as term can have a few different meanings. There are different terms under the ‘country of origin’ term: country of parts (COP), meaning the origin of the parts that the final product is then assembled of, country of manufacturing (COM), country of brand (COB) and country of design (COD). As the production process is complex and involving various countries usually, the country of origin does not always indicate the whole truth. (Ha-Brookshire & Yoon, 2012)

In the past, the “made in” label was first created as a penalty for Germany for losing the World War I. The idea was that when exporting products from Germany, consumers in other countries would know where the product is from and thus influencing consumers to not purchase the product. As a result, this has not been a punishment, but it has created trust in consumers of the label “made in Germany” since they have been seeing these products for decades, and thus after several years, it is considered as a sign of quality. (Morello, 1984)

According to Al-Sulaiti and Baker (1998), some companies express the country of origin as the home country of the brand/company, or where the headquarters are located, whereas others tell the manufacturing country through the “made in” labels. Another issue related to informing the country of origin, is that the manufacturing and assembly processes are complex and different parts of manufacturing can happen in different countries, and in addition the headquarters of the company mostly is located in different place than the manufacturing actions. This may also confuse the consumer, that which country of origin is informed through the “made in” label. (Al-Sulaiti & Baker, 1998)

### 3.1 Country of origin influence on consumers

There are debating views on whether country of origin is an influencing factor when choosing or evaluating a product. The influence of country of origin is connected to the product category and therefore the results of studies may be different. (Tseng & Balabanis, 2011; Miranda, 2020) According to Costa, Carneiro and Goldszmidt (2016) evaluation of technology products is highly influenced by country of origin, whereas for clothes as an example, country of origin is not playing such a big role. But what still remains unknown, is how much the country of origin is influencing consumers (Al-Sulati & Baker, 1998).

According to prior research, country of origin is affecting consumers perception of the product, brand, and the quality of the product. Expressing the country of origin in a product can influence the consumer and therefore can be seen as a marketing tool. (Tseng & Balabanis, 2011) For example various Australian brands are clearly stating the origin of the product due to Australia having an image of being “clean and green” and therefore brands believe it has a favourable influence in exported products on consumers and their purchase behaviour. (Wade, 2006) The label expressing the origin of the product can create an image of the product in the consumer’s mind. The effect of country of origin is greatly dependent on the product category, and therefore there is no general theories in the field. As an example, Germany as a country may increase the value of a car brand but might not do the same in other product category. (Tseng & Balabanis, 2011)

According to Roman, Manolică and Manole (2019) consumers are using country of origin when assessing products. Consumers are being influenced by information of the product, as an example by the appearance of the product or packaging, and by different advertising measures. Country of origin can be seen as a direct or indirect effect on evaluating the product. The country image itself may not influence the consumers opinion on the product, but the fact that how the country of origin and the product fit together in the consumers opinion, has a great influence. The way consumers see the country is having an effect on product evaluation and further influencing the consumer on the decision on

whether to buy the product or not. As an example, if the consumer has visited the country or met people from the country, or the consumer has seen the country being presented in different events and media, it influences the consumer's views of the country. In the end, these emotions can be positive or negative and furthermore influence the purchasing decision. (Roman, Manolică & Manole, 2019; Cui, Fitzgerald & Donovan, 2014). Also, consumers' opinions and views of a country are a sum of various aspects, and it is not merely a statement by someone but a process that takes time to develop (Roman, et al., 2019; Miranda, 2020). In addition, if there is a negative action done by a country, the action's influence is stronger to people outside the country than to the people who are living in the country (Cui, Fitzgerald & Donovan, 2014).

Country of origin and the perception on the brand is highly connected to the brand of the product. Meaning that when consumers are recognizing a product from a well-known brand, they are considering the brand's country of origin, and therefore leaving the manufacturing country out of the picture. (Kim & Chun, 2017; Saran & Gupta, 2012) In some cases, the brand origin is clear for the consumers, but there are also brands that the consumers have different views on the origin. This confusion of consumer may rise since the brand itself is not communicating the origin on purpose or that by accident it is not clearly informed. (Saran & Gupta, 2012)

Country of origin has been proved to be a key influencing factor when it is related to high involvement products (Veale & Quester, 2009; Miranda, 2020). With a high involvement product is meant that the product is involving the consumer more to the decision-making process, such as collecting data to being able to make the decision. An example of a high involvement product is a car for example, which usually requires learning about the product and possibly trying out the product prior to the purchase. (De Mooij, 2014, p. 217) But not all studies support this statement. According to a study made by Godey, et al. (2012) and a study made by Godey, Aiello, Donvito, Chan, Oh and Weitz (2012), country of origin was not a significant factor when purchasing a luxury product, and the result was that the brand had a greater impact than country of origin. Additionally, Miranda

(2020) states that the more the consumer is involved in the purchasing process, the less the country of origin is influencing the decision. Usually, younger consumers are more involved in the purchasing process and therefore the country of origin is not that influential factor in the process, and the value of country of origin is increasing with consumer's age. (Miranda, 2020) On the contrary to a low involvement product, the country of origin is not thought to be in such a big role (Veale & Quester, 2009). Low involvement product then refers to everyday products, which are bought more frequently, and therefore does not involve the consumer in the decision-making that much (De Mooij, 2014, p. 217).

There are two studies made to American consumers in the 1960s, which reveal American consumers' thoughts towards foreign products. The first research studied how American consumers are seeing foreign products from various other countries and in addition, American products. The result was that American products were evaluated of being the best in each category (such as clothing and mechanical products), and Japanese products last in each. (Reiersen, 1966) Supporting this statement, consumers that are ethnocentric are evaluating domestic products to be of better quality than exported products. (Cui et al., 2014) Due to these patriotic reasons, in some studies the domestic products have been left out of the study in order to get more reliable results (Dekhili & Achabou, 2015) The other study was pointed out, that if there are unfavourable images of some countries it might influence companies' choices on where to manufacture the product and how to market the product. (Schooler, 1965)

Country of origin can be favourable for brands and companies and in some cases, companies want to highlight the origin to create a favourable image of the brand as well (Wade, 2006). In various cases, the country of origin may not be favourable for the brand, and it might be left aside and just trying to market the brand itself. An example of this, is the Spanish fashion group – Inditex. The company has not utilized the country of origin in their marketing due to Spanish not having a favourable country image in terms of fashion. The Inditex Group has been able to become the largest clothing retailer in the

world, even though the 'made in Spain' fraise is not creating positive connotations in consumers. But as the Inditex has left aside marketing that they are Spanish, the value of 'made in Spanish' fraise has not increased in value. (Miranda, 2020)

The country of origin is used related to quality when the consumer may not have experience from a specific product beforehand. Most commonly, the opinion of a product is created after purchasing and using the product and concluding whether it satisfied the needs the consumer had of the product. But when purchasing a new product, consumers may lean their opinion on the conclusion of a few product attributes, such as the packaging and country of origin as a guiding factor of quality. The association of the country of origin can be positive or negative. Related to country image, there is a term "country equity" which refers to how consumers identify the country and its strengths and weaknesses. The way country equity is born, is not a simple thing since no one can really guide it towards a specific direction, but it is a sum of various things. (Lusk, et al., 2006)

Product's country of origin labelling usually influences consumers in two different ways. Country of origin and quality are related, and consumers may be more confident on buying a product from a specific country, such as the taste, safety etc. Another way is that the consumers are simply favouring a specific country or want to support a specific country, such as their home country. A term "consumer ethnocentrism" was created to explain consumers' buying loyalty towards specific countries. (Lusk, Brown, Mark, Proseku, Thompson & Welsh, 2006)

Country of origin is seen to influence consumers in their decision-making process. Since consumers are influenced by the country of origin, it is essential for companies to know what consumers are thinking about the origin of the product. (Saran & Gupta, 2012)

The country-of-origin effect have been studied in terms of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism refers to a phenomenon, where people see their country as superior to others, in consumerism this means that consumers are evaluating the products from their home



country to being better than products from other countries. The study concentrated on Greek consumers and to decrease the number of ethnocentric consumers, the target group was younger consumers who are well-educated. The study resulted that for ethnocentric consumers, the country of origin is playing a rather big role, when the product in question is from the consumers home country. (Chrysochoidis, Krystallis & Perreas, 2006)

In the contrary, when studying the relationship of emerging countries and domestic versus international products, the results were the opposite. In emerging countries, consumers are rather choosing the international or “Western” alternative than a domestic one. In addition, in some emerging countries, there have been campaigns to increase the awareness of purchasing a domestic product, but still, most likely the chosen product is an international one. (Touzani, Fatma & Meriem, 2015)

Country of origin can be used as an indicator in evaluating green products. In a study made by Dekhili and Achabou (2015), consumers were evaluating countries’ readiness to produce products that are green, referring to the development level of the country which furthermore influenced the perception of quality of the green product. As an example, legislation is one of the factors that tells the consumer whether the country able to produce ecological products or not. The study revealed that if a country has a favourable ecological image, the country is able to differentiate with their products, compared to countries that does not have such a good image ecologically. (Dekhili & Achabou, 2015)

### **3.2 Country of origin in fashion industry**

The importance of country of origin has been studied in the field of fashion as well. According to Kim and Chun (2017) consumers are utilising the country of origin when they evaluate a fashion product and its quality. The study concluded that the countries that hold a stronger brand image in terms of country of origin and in generally in fashion, gets the consumers closer to purchase intention. The consumers are also estimating these

items higher than from a country with less respectful country image or image in terms of fashion. (Kim & Chun, 2017)

The influence of country-of-origin image have been studied related to brand loyalty. This study was made to Iranian people who represents the Generation Y and the product in question was a luxury fashion brand. The study resulted to country-of-origin not having a significant influence on the brand loyalty per se, but when dividing the country-of-origin image to cultural assets, fashion equity and technology advancement, the technology advancement was the only one with a significant influence on the brand loyalty. (Esmailpour & Abdolvand, 2016)

### **3.3 Country of origin attributes**

According to Han (1989) country of origin can either have a “halo effect” or a “summary effect” on consumers when choosing a product. The halo effect means that the consumer is not having prior knowledge on the product they are choosing, and the country of origin is therefore playing a halo role in the assessment process. Through the country of origin, the consumer can make assessments about the quality of the product. On the other hand, the summary effect of a country of origin means that the consumer is aware of the products with the mentioned country of origin, and therefore has prior knowledge on the products. (Han, 1989) Similarly, consumers are considering country of origin as an important factor when they are estimating a product from a product category that they are not acquainted with before the purchase decision. As an example, if a consumer is buying a product and is not familiar with the exact product category but knows similar kind of products to be of good quality when they are made for example in France, consumer may use this knowledge as a guiding factor and lean the purchasing decision based on the assumed quality. (Josiassen, Lukas, Whitwell, 2008) As in some categories other countries are perceived as high quality or more valuable compared to other countries. Such as in fashion, France and Italy are known for their fashion and Switzerland known for their watches worldwide, and therefore might be considered to be more

valuable and more desirable. (Miranda, 2020) Thus, in the research made for this thesis, will be examined whether the positive country of origin of the product category is generating more positive feelings towards the perceived sustainability.

Country of origin can also be divided to performance-related COO images and performance-unrelated country emotions. The performance-related COO images are covering country imagery and country image. These are consumer's perception of the images of countries, and these are most commonly connected to product categories. As used previously as an example, is the German cars, which are thought to be of good quality since consumers may have the image that German engineers are diligent and well-educated. On the other hand, the performance-unrelated country emotions are emotions related to affinity and animosity towards a country. This means that consumers may have some kind of feelings towards a country, and it may not be associated to the product or products category, it still may affect the purchase intentions of the consumers. An example of this performance-unrelated country emotions was that Chinese people consider Japanese products being high-quality, but they are having strong negative emotions towards the country due to historical events, and therefore they are not buying Japanese products. (Kock, et al., 2019)

## **4 Methodology**

The research made for this thesis will be made through the qualitative method. Therefore, in this chapter, the qualitative way as a research method will be introduced. Following with why qualitative research method was chosen for this research and how the research will be conducted.

### **4.1 Qualitative research**

Supporting the choice of qualitative study is the fact that there is a lack of qualitative studies in the field, and therefore qualitative study may create deeper knowledge on consumers thought processes related to creating an image of a products sustainability. In the field of country-of-origin effect, quantitative method is mostly used, and in the field of sustainability, there both quantitative and qualitative methods are used. There also are research that are combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. The studies made have mostly concentrated on one or few nationalities and creating a survey for the selected target group.

Qualitative research contains a wide range of ways to do research and it is used in multiple industries. Through qualitative research is possible to understand the way people behave and why. (Mariampolski, 2001; Brinkmann, 2013, p. 1) Qualitative research uses most commonly unstructured or semi-structured questions to understand the behavior or occurrence. (Mariampolski, 2001) Another way to classify qualitative interviews is to distribute it three ways, where on top of unstructured and semi-structured, a structured interview method is added. The structured interview method indicates that that all the interviewees are asked the same question in the same order, whereas the unstructured interview only gives a topic to discuss and not a structured questionnaire or guideline for the interview. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008)

Qualitative research can be conducted in different ways, namely, for example through focus groups and individual interviews (Mariampolski, 2001; Brinkmann, 2013). The

participants in focus groups can vary from a few people to around 10 people. Focus group is a good option to understand markets and different phenomena in a deeper level. (Mariampolski, 2001) Another way to group people is to have people in small groups, containing two or three people, also called as dyads and triads. These groups can be naturally occurring, such as couples or families, or created for the interview process. In individual interviews, the idea is to ask open questions to get the thoughts of the interviewee. Individual interviews are used in cases when the opinions or reactions of one interviewee is needed without disturbance from others. (Mariampolski, 2001) In addition, the interviewer can guide the discussion towards a desirable direction to get the needed information to the research.

In order for the qualitative research to be reliable, certain aspects need to be thought through. Objectiveness is essential for the research to be reliable, and this need to be in mind when interviewing and analyzing the data. The opinions of the researcher or interviewer cannot influence the interviewees or the research. It is important to have a neutral mindset for the research and not concentrate on own opinions and views on the discussed topics. Related to the objectiveness it is important to be critical regarding the process. In order for being able to compare the results, there needs to be enough respondents for the research. There is no clear number of how many, but it is essential to keep in mind this aspect as well. The sample of respondents will need to be selected carefully. If the respondents selected for the research does not fulfil the requirements of a respondent, the research is not reliable. In larger processes, there can be several people involved in the process, such as the person creating the research, the interviewer, moderators, and the ones analyzing the data.

## **4.2 Data collection and analysis**

As previously presented, qualitative research can use semi-structured or unstructured questions and interview process can be conducted either in groups or as an individual interview. In the study made for this master's thesis, the qualitative research will be semi-structured, meaning the research will follow an interview guide made prior the

interviews, which provides the possibility to clarify the questions and guide the discussion towards the correct direction. The empirical data will be primary data since the data will be gathered for the master's thesis specifically (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

The qualitative research will be made through individual interviews. The reason individual interviews were chosen is to get the opinions and reactions of the individuals without an influence of another peer since in focus groups the dynamic of the groups as well as the opinions of others may have an influence (Mariampolski, 2001). The target of this research is to gather people's own ideas and thinking processes of sustainability, and thus the group setting might influence individual's own ideas. In this setting, it is possible to receive answers from all the respondents, as in the group setting, someone's opinions might be left aside, when others are more talkative. In addition, in individual interviews, personal or sensitive information is easier to share with one interviewee compared to telling it to a bigger group. (Brinkmann, 2013 p. 26-27) Even though this research is not about sharing personal information, the individual interviews may be an easier place to share thoughts as well as for the interviewer to guide the discussion towards the correct direction. (Mariampolski, 2001).

What comes to the actual research phase, this research is done for a Master's Thesis, and the research is small by scope and the research phase is executed by one person only. In the interview phase, the target is to verify the opinions and views of the respondent, and this means that additional questions and questioning answers and attitudes are a part of the process. (Mariampolski, 2001)

Prior to the interview phase is essential to understand the analysis process of a qualitative research. Compared to quantitative process, the analysis process is more involved throughout the whole process in qualitative research and starts already in the interview phase and continues after the interview is over. With having the mindset of starting the analysis as part of the interview phase already, it creates more depth to the interview,

as the interviewer can design the questions in a different way and ask additional questions to get the most out of the interview. (Mariampolski, 2001)

In order for the interviewer to get the most out of the interview, there needs to be a way to gather information during the interview as without the information, there is no data to analyze. The ways to complete the information gathering is to have audiotapes, videotapes, notes taken by moderator or observer, and exercises done by the respondents. (Mariampolski, 2001) As in the interview setting, there is only one interviewer and no observer or moderator, there is no possibility to take notes and concentrate to the interview at a maximum mindset. Taking notes may also disturb the interviewee in the process, which takes out this alternative in the process. The most convenient ways to gather is through audiotapes and videotapes for this research. Of these two data collecting methods, the videotape does not seem necessary, and therefore audiotape is the choice for this interview process. Audiotapes make the data analysis easier, as the data can be gone through various times. After reviewing the audiotape, the interviews are commonly transferred to written form, to transcripts or notes. (Mariampolski, 2001) Recording the interviews requires a permission from the interviewees, and luckily all the interviewees agreed to the recording. After the interviews the data was transferred to transcripts.

The interview guide starts with building a background for how the consumer sees sustainable consumption and which factors guide them towards sustainable consumption. To get deeper into the topic, there are questions related to specific purchase situations, what happens before it and why. There are questions to guide the discussion towards the correct direction, such as the questions related to country-of-origin, if the topic does not come up from the interviewee side. In addition, there are questions that are not needed to present in a specific order, but when the topic comes up.

The interview guide can be found in appendix 1.

### 4.3 Selection of interviewees

Through the research is studied how country of origin is influencing consumer's evaluation on the sustainability of a fashion item. As the research questions states the perception of consumers, the study will be made to consumers and in more detail, the target group for this research is consumers who consider sustainability in their consumption of clothing items. The interviewees are Finnish consumers of 20-30-year-olds.

A study made by Joy et al. (2012) was presented previously and is rather close to this study in terms of sustainability. The study was not concentrating on country-of-origin effect which differentiates the study from the study made for this master's thesis. In the study, many interviewees were conscious about the status of the world and made good choices in terms of sustainability, for example washing full loads and recycling. However, the sustainable thinking did not reach to buying fashion items. This study was helpful for creating the target group for this research.

The target of the study is to study sustainable consumption and what different factors have an influence on the evaluation process. There were certain criteria the interviewees needed fulfill to be able to take part in the study. The main criterium was the fact that the people are considering sustainability when consuming clothing items. Other criteria were that the people are Finnish and aged 20-30-year-olds. 13 people were asked to be part of the interview, and one of these were excluded due to not matching all the criteria and three others due to scheduling issues, in the end 9 people were interviewed.

The interviewees were from 4 different cities in Finland, and with different education and occupation background. There were 6 females and 3 males interviewed, and majority of the interviewees were employed at that moment. The interviews lasted between 29 to 40 minutes, with the average of 34 minutes. Below in the table 1, the demographic data of the interviewees can be seen.



	Age	Gender	City	Education	Occupation	Family structure	Time (minutes)
Interviewee A	26	Female	Tampere	Bachelor's degree, graduated	Employed	Partner and a dog	31
Interviewee B	23	Female	Helsinki	Bachelor's degree, studying master's	Employed	Partner	30
Interviewee C	29	Female	Oulu	Master's degree	Employed	Partner and a dog	29
Interviewee D	25	Male	Helsinki	Bachelor's degree, graduated	Employed	Partner	40
Interviewee E	27	Male	Helsinki	Bachelor's degree, graduated	Employed	Partner	40
Interviewee F	24	Female	Helsinki	Master's degree	Part-time employed, part-time student	Living alone	35
Interviewee G	25	Female	Oulu	Bachelor's degree, studying master's degree	Employed and a student	Partner and a dog	36
Interviewee H	29	Female	Pori	High-school graduate, practical nurse	Part-time entrepreneur	Living with a child	32
Interviewee I	27	Male	Tampere	Bachelor's degree	Employed	Partner	30

**Table 2:** Demographics of the interviewees

#### 4.4 Quality of the study

In a research process, it is important to have reliability and validity aspects part of it. In qualitative research, the process may be more complex to repeat similarly various times compared to quantitative research. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015)

In terms of reliability, it is essential that there are enough interviewees as well as the interviewees meeting the criteria set for the target group (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p.305). In this research, there were nine interviewees that met the set criteria in terms of nationality, age, and being consumers that consider sustainability in their fashion consumption. In the interviews, the researcher acted in a neutral manner in order to not influence the interviewees during the interview. The interviews followed the same interview guide.

Validity is a term which creates differing opinions whether it is the correct term to use in qualitative research, but it is generally used to indicate that the “report or description is correct” (Eriksson, Kovalainen, 2015, p. 305) In terms of validity few questions were improved after the first interview and the order of the questions was modified to create a clear interview guide. The results from the first interview did not vary compared to the other interviews as there were no major changes made for the guide and thus the answers of the first interview were part of the analysis as well. The last eight interviews followed the same interview guide.

## 5 Results and discussion

The conducted study focused on fashion consumption taking into consideration the consumer's sustainability values and finding out what aspects are taking into consideration in the purchasing process. Through the study, it was found how sustainability is seen in this process and how it affects the process. The target was to find out what influences on how sustainable a product is seen and whether country of origin has an influence in the perceived sustainability.

The target group for this study was people who consider sustainability related to fashion consumption and all the interviewees who were chosen for this study consider this aspect. The level in the sustainable consumption still varied, and there were people that in general do not support any fast fashion brands and want to buy second-hand items to prolong the life cycle of the items. For some interviewees, they are in the phase that they want to make better decisions, and have reduced the amount they are purchasing, but can still sometimes make spontaneous purchasing decisions, and buy from fast-fashion brands. In addition, there were people somewhere in-between these examples.

In the following chapters, the interviews are gone through by themes. Starting with sustainable consumption, which includes how they have started to consume in a more sustainable way and the reasons for their sustainable consumption, followed by how sustainable consumption is seen in their lives. Also, concrete examples of purchases are gone through in this second chapter. Third, the evaluation process on the sustainability aspect is gone through and finally concentrating on the country of origin, and how aware the interviewees are with brand's country of origin and the manufacturing country and whether they have an influence on the evaluation process. Finally, an analysis on the answers.

## 5.1 Reasons for sustainable consumption

The first question of the study was related to whether the interviewee had always thought about sustainable consumption and if not, what has guided into the more sustainable way of consuming. All the interviewees answered that they have not always consumed in a sustainable way and in various answers was repeated that they have started to think this sustainability aspect in the past few years. The interviewees explained that they have become more aware on the influence of fashion consumption, the status of the climate and the issues fashion industry has. Many interviewees had watched documentary or read about fashion industry, and therefore understood for example how polluting the industry is. Also, the influence of friends and family was mentioned, and the fact that we as individuals can influence others and make changes as well as learn more. For some interviewees, the people and/or accounts they follow on Instagram have had an influence, as they are following people who bring out sustainability and sustainable consumption in their social media. Also, media has brought up different injustices in fashion industry, such as how the people are being treated who are making the clothes.

For many interviewees the highpoint of consumption has been during the teenage years, as then people mostly are under a social pressure to have nice clothes and around 5-10 years ago, the issues of fashion industry were not so visible in the media.

*“Especially when I was younger, I bought clothes from fast fashion stores and nowadays I buy less from those stores. But from time to time, I still make purchases in fast fashion stores.” -Interviewee G*

*“Earlier, I used to consume more fast fashion, since I was not thinking about the consequences and also my own financial situation had an effect on the consumption.” -Interviewee I*

*“When I was younger, I made purchasing decisions only due to having an urge to purchase. Also, the social pressure was larger, and you sort of needed to have the newest, and most trendy items and the sustainability aspect was not part of the process in any ways.” -Interviewee F*

During the interviews, three interviewees mentioned that in their childhood their family has gone to flea markets and brought their own clothes to flea markets as well, so the concept of recycling clothes has been part of their lives from the early years. All these people who mentioned that already in their childhood have gone to flea markets, are also utilizing flea markets and secondhand options now, when in need of a new clothing item. In addition, there were interviewees who utilize flea markets today, but did not bring out have they been using them before.

The reasons for purchasing in a more sustainable way can be mostly categorized to two parts – environmental and social reasons. Over the years, the interviewees have become more aware of the reality of fashion industry, how polluting it is and what kind of working conditions the employees mostly have. With acknowledging this, they have wanted to reduce their own consumption to have a positive influence on the environment.

The different sustainability aspects of sustainability were brought up related to interviewees’ own consumption habits. The reasons for sustainable consumption can be categorized to both social and environmental sustainability aspects. Over the years, the interviewees have become more aware of the reality of fashion industry, how polluting it is and what kind of working conditions the employees mostly have. With acknowledging this, they have wanted to reduce their own consumption to have a positive influence on the environment.

Related to the social reasons, mostly was brought up the working conditions in general in fashion industry as well as the employees do not receive a living wage.

*"I do not feel good about the working conditions of the employees." -Interviewee D*

*"I want to support that the clothes are made in good conditions and with good pay." - Interviewee H*

*"The mass production and making with a large volume negatively influences the working conditions." -Interviewee A*

What comes to the environmental reasons, many interviewees were concerned about the fashion industry's influence on our environment and planet.

*"The awareness has increased on how much resources fashion industry is consuming." - Interviewee I*

*"I have been working in a clothing store and a lot of clothing items arrived there and I saw how much unnecessary items there are, and I began to wonder how much resources (natural resources and materials) it takes. All the items cannot be necessary. ... Nature is important for me, and I try to protect it and I aim to have a positive influence on nature and animals with my own choices." -Interviewee A*

*"I have become aware of the figures how much emissions fashion industry generates. ... I understood that I can decrease the emissions by buying less fast fashion." -Interviewee B*

*"I worry about our planet and the future." -Interviewee C*

*"I wonder what I can do to not consume the nature that much, and that way having and influence on climate change. I aim to having an influence by decreasing my carbon footprint." -Interviewee F*

In addition to the sustainability aspects, other kinds of realization have happened among the interviewees that has changed their way of consuming.

*“Media and all the discussion happening around me has had an influence. Also, my friends have had an influence since my friends mostly are people who consider sustainability aspect when consuming.” -Interviewee C*

*“I had a point in life when I was doing my exchange studies and had only a small part of the clothes with me, and I understood that I am doing fine with the clothes I have with me. I understood that I really do not need [clothes] as much as I have and that was the turning point in unnecessary consumption.” -Interviewee E*

An interviewee who has a child, mentioned the financial aspect of consumption in addition to the sustainability aspects, especially when purchasing clothing items for the child. The interviewee wanted to purchase products that are of better quality, and thus usually more expensive, compared to purchasing products with worse quality and commonly lower price, because you end up purchasing more items in the end. Another supporting fact was that when purchasing a high-quality product, you can sell or give it forward for the next user, and this way prolong the life cycle of the product.

A few interviewees brought up the fact that they feel that they need to act in a more sustainable way related to consumption. The actions they make are in their own conscious and thus they want to make better decisions. A few interviewees also mentioned that it should not only be in the hands of an individual consumer, but companies and governments should make actions as well and try to make sustainable consumption easier and the common habit.

*“I feel that I need to act this way, that there is some kind of pressure behind the actions.”*

*"I feel that this is the way I am supposed to act. ... If there is some influence on what I do and it produces something good, it is always good." -Interviewee C*

*"I feel that the individual consumer's choices are rather small, and it is more a matter of conscious to act in a more sustainable way." -Interviewee D*

## **5.2 Sustainable consumption in every-day life**

Next, the questions guided the discussion towards how sustainable consumption is seen and how it is visible in their lives and actions. All nine interviewees answered that they have reduced the amount of clothing item they purchase. Buying less new clothes was already seen as a sustainable habit.

*"In general, the number of purchases has decreased." -Interviewee A*

*"I do not want to overconsume, as I know that I get along fine with fewer items." -Interviewee E*

*"I am purchasing less and usually making a sustainable choice, and therefore I think it is acceptable to purchase from a so-called fast fashion store from time to time." -Interviewee G*

Also, the purchasing process has prolonged for most of the interviewees. The reason for it is that they are considering more carefully than before whether they are actually in need of the item or only have an urge to purchase it. Eight interviewees mentioned that they are considering that the item would be long-lasting. And thus, also second-hand items are bought, so that they can prolong the life cycle of an item. Also, three people mentioned that they are actively trying to avoid spontaneous purchases, and this way also influencing their own consumption behavior.



*"I aim to not purchase new clothes, and I only purchase necessary products. ... The purchasing processes are long. The previous purchase process took two years, from understanding the need and then considering different alternatives to finally making the purchase."* -Interviewee C

*"When getting the inspiration, I start to wonder how much and how long I would use it, if I were to purchase it. I aim to avoid impulsive decisions, and if I see some nice item in a store, I tend to think at least over the night before making the purchase."* -Interviewee E

*"If I am purchasing new items, I am not selecting fast fashion items."* -Interviewee H

*"If I have a need to purchase some item, I aim to purchase it second hand."* -Interviewee F

*"If I purchase something, I am considering whether it is actually necessary to purchase."* -Interviewee A

Eight out of nine interviewees are utilizing second-hand options. For some, purchasing second-hand options is always the first step and only after that thinking of purchasing a new item. For a few interviewees it was a newer addition to their purchasing habits. The ways to consume second-hand items varied as others were looking into a specific item or an item with a specific brand, while others had a general category they need to purchase for, and then going to flea markets. In second-hand purchases both physical flea markets and different platforms and websites where consumers can sell items were mentioned.

*"I have increased the number of second-hand purchases and in general the number of purchases have decreased."* -Interviewee I

*“If I have a need to purchase something, I aim to purchase it second-hand. Generally, I find what I am looking for second-hand. I have decreased purchasing new items as well as purchasing clothes made from virgin materials.” -Interviewee F*

*“I purchase most clothes second-hand either from flea markets or different web platforms.” -Interviewee B*

### **5.2.1 Concrete examples of sustainable consumption**

In the study, the interviewees were asked to go through the purchasing process of a clothing item from when they have the initial thought to purchase leading to the actual purchase. The examples were both about purchasing new items and second-hand items, and therefore the results are presented in two parts. First is gone through the purchasing process of a new item, followed by the second-hand option.

### **5.2.2 Case example of purchasing a new item**

The case examples were quite different from another, but the idea and starting point was similar for most. The fact that they are considering more whether they actually need the product thoroughly and after being sure, it is needed, they make the purchase. For most of the interviewees doing background checks is important prior the purchase. Also, most are checking the alternatives and making comparisons before making the purchasing decision. Generally, the interviewees emphasized the quality of the product and the length of the life cycle, also the country of origin was mentioned.

Few interviewees primarily intend to purchase second-hand options but there are also situations where they decide to purchase a new item. According to the interviewees purchasing stories, it may be because, there is a sudden need for an item, or that they have been looking for a specific product but have not found it second-hand and therefore end up purchasing it new.

When going to the purchase phase, the answers are quite different from another, where one is avoiding fast fashion products, others are making background checks for brands and companies and others go to a store and purchase the product. In many of the answers recurred the fact when purchasing new, they want to make a “better choice” – meaning that they are making background checks for the brand and for the product, how the product was made, starting with the materials, and ending with where it is produced, and making sure that it is a long-lasting one.

Interviewee D explained that he is purchasing clothes once in a year or once in two years, and therefore mostly is purchasing a couple items at the same time. The purchase intention in the previous purchase started with a need for shirts for work and then he went shopping those items to a physical store. He ended up making a rather spontaneous purchase decision for a new jacket on top of the shirts, as he had had the need for it for a few years already but had not find one. In the end, he allowed himself to purchase the products as he had the need for them and had not purchased new items for a year. In the process he neither did not secure the manufacturing process nor the manufacturing country when making the process, which is common for him, and that is something that bothered him afterwards.

Interviewee E who was not yet that commonly utilizing second-hand options, is trying to support smaller actors, and avoiding fast fashion brands and this way also mass production of clothes. For this person, the transparency of the manufacturing process, knowing the manufacturing country and good working conditions of the employees were important factors when selecting new items.

For Interviewee G the process usually starts with a need as well, followed by checking the brand, the company website, comparing alternatives and reading other people’s experiences of the product. For the interviewee the aim is to make the sustainable choice and she is ready to pay more of it, but there still is a limit of how much to pay for a more sustainable product compared to a “unsustainable” choice, and if the price difference is

big, it is normal for her to purchase the one with the lower price. Also, in some cases she may purchase a product that is decreased to half price, as she knows it is a good deal, and in these situations the sustainability aspect is not playing such a big role.

Interviewee H, who has a child, the goal is to always purchase when there is an actual need for the product. She also told that she rarely gets urges to purchase new items for herself. As she has a child, there are more occasions when items need to be purchased. She is also making clothes herself and thus is not purchasing new items that often. In the example cases of two last purchases, the items were purchased for the child and the purchases were made in a supermarket, and she was aware that it was not a sustainable choice, but she had a need for the items. She ended up purchasing pants for the child, even though they were cheap, and she knew that it is not possible for the employees to receive a living wage or that it would not be possible to purchase the material for the product with that price, but in this scenario, she made the decision to purchase them. She did comparison between different sizes and bought the bigger size if the product were to shrink so that the lifecycle would be longer. Another example was of a shoe purchase. She chose a Finnish brand, as she knew they last long from experience. She is aware that the product is not anymore made in Finland, but as she knew the quality of the shoes and was aware that the shoes could be worn by at least a few children, she made the purchasing decision. Another alternative for the shoes was the stores own brand, which is cheaper than the Finnish brand but also the quality was not as good, and therefore would last probably only one child, if that.

Interviewee I had an example of a spontaneous purchase. This interviewee sometimes has urges or an urgent “need” for a new item and may act spontaneously in his purchasing decisions. When purchasing new items, he is commonly not making background checks but is going to a store and making a spontaneous decision to buy from a store he knows that he finds the most suitable alternative.

Interviewee F presented that she always tries to go deeper into the purchase intention that whether it is an urge to purchase since she saw something in social media, or it is otherwise a trend that may not be permanent. She is concentrating on this since she does not want to purchase products that she is not going to use for long. She has a few favorite brands, that she has done background checks and knows where the materials come from, where the products are made in and have also got information on the manufacturing process and seen pictures from the factory through their website. All this information has increased the level of trust towards this brand and therefore she can support the brand. On another occasion, if the brand is not familiar, she wants to do background checks and see how and where the products are produced in. In the purchasing process, she tries to find out the whole production process, of what the materials are and how the materials are made and how and where the actual product then is made.

Interviewee F also has a principle to purchase products that are manufactured 'close', generally meaning Europe. She brought up the logistical influence on the environment and presented an example that if a product is made in Asia, then shipped to US, as the example brand would be a US brand and then you order it online, and it is shipped to Finland. The logistical element has a big influence on the emissions and thus she wants to make different decisions.

Interviewee A explained that the process is longer, and she is more conscious of purchasing items as she wishes to purchase products she would use regularly and for long. She is avoiding making purchases that she is only using a few times to reduce purchasing something unnecessary. In her purchasing process the most important thing is that the item fits the needs she has for the it and she is usually comparing different products and she wants to select a product she can see herself using for various years. Also, if the clothing item has a label of how it is made of recycled materials, it catches her attention, and she is checking the product in the process. This does not necessarily mean that she is selecting the product, but it has an influence on the process.

Interviewee B explained that she usually purchases outdoor clothes new, as there is not that good selection of products second-hand, she wishes to purchase. She also has favorite brands she prefers when making purchasing decisions. She knows what features she wants the clothing items to have, and therefore they are guiding her purchasing decision. The fact that the item is of good quality, and they go for long are the most important. She also checks the materials, but the material is not the main factor.

An interesting thought rose, as two interviewees informed that they are being more selective and making more comparison and background checks when they are making a purchase that is more expensive. In these cases, the investment is bigger financially, and therefore wanting to make sure that the item is well produced and of good quality. However, when it comes to cheaper products such as socks and underwear, they are not concentrating on making a 'better' choice that much.

### **5.2.3 Case example of purchasing a second-hand item**

Eight interviewees are utilizing second-hand options when making purchases. For few interviewees purchasing second-hand options is always the first step when thinking of a new purchase.

Some interviewees mentioned that there is a good selection of second-hand items, and it is easy find what you are looking for without making purchases new. One interviewee explained that he is making second-hand purchases on items that he does not want to spend money when purchasing new. He said that he is purchasing clothes from some more expensive brands since he gets them with a cheaper price.

*"The first choice is to purchase second-hand and there is a good selection on second-hand products." -Interviewee F*

*"If I do not find the item second-hand, I spend more time making the choice on which brand's items I am purchasing." -Interviewee B*

*"I think the easiest is to not purchase new items and focus on second-hand products compared to trying to find the actually sustainable choice from all the selection." -Interviewee C*

In general, the interviewees explained that they have the idea that purchasing second-hand items is a better choice and therefore are primarily purchasing them. For most parts, the interviewees told that they can make spontaneous purchasing decision easier than when purchasing new, and that they may buy a clothing item that is nice, and they are not that much looking into how long they are going to use it for. The interviewees brought up the fact that they are not looking into the production process as much compared to when purchasing new. Also, the brand and the manufacturing country is not usually playing such a big role. Following kind of comments were received of shopping second-hand items:

*"I may basically purchase any item since it is already more sustainable since it is second-hand." -Interviewee G*

*"I sometimes make spontaneous purchasing decisions in flea markets since it feels a better way to consume, and there is a lower threshold to purchase second-hand items." -Interviewee B*

Two interviewees mentioned that they are checking the materials when purchasing second-hand items in order to make a good quality purchase. They are mostly concentrating that the items would contain natural materials, such as cotton or wool. Sometimes they still make purchasing decisions where the material does not play such a big role.

Even though mostly the brand was not playing such a big role when purchasing second-hand items, one interviewee mentioned an ultra-fast fashion brand, which she does not want to support. She does not want to purchase the products from the specific brand

new and also if she sees the brand in flea markets, she is not purchasing the item since she does not want to support the brand in any way.

Two interviewees also brought up some problematic matters related to consuming second-hand items. Through these comments it can be seen that the processes are complex, and everything is not black and white.

*“There are defects in second-hand purchases as well. Purchasing second-hand items has become more common and in some ways the consumption behavior what was present in the fast fashion side a few years ago has transferred to second-hand items. If one buys a lot of new items and are not using them, it is not that sustainable, even though they are bought second-hand.” -Interviewee F*

*“Purchasing second-hand items is a better choice, but at the same time it may finance the seller’s new purchases, that may be bought new.” -Interviewee G*

Many important points were presented, and as the whole fashion industry is quite complex, also the purchasing processes and decision making have become more complex.

### **5.3 Sustainability evaluation of a product**

For most interviewees there was not only one factor that influences the perception on the sustainability of the product. Some interviewees emphasized that in the personal level is about only making necessary purchases and reducing the number of purchases and that way being sustainable. The interviewees brought up the quality, brand, the manufacturing country, sustainability reports, and the different certificates the product may have. Also, the fact that the product is long-lasting has an influence on how the interviewees are seeing the product sustainable.



*“The manufacturing country and brand influences the evaluation. Also, the fact that the sustainability report looks bad has an influence and I am not doing more evaluation on the brand in that case.” -Interviewee E*

*“In some cases, the fact that is mentioned that “no animals were harmed in the process” may be enough and the company having certificates creates trust. ... Also, the quality aspect has a great influence as it is a more sustainable choice if the product is durable. If I have read the product to be durable, it increases the perceived sustainability of the brand, even though the brand itself may not be extremely sustainable.” -Interviewee C*

*“The company already creates some image and that has an influence on how sustainable I see the brand. ... I have read about more expensive brands, and many of these brands’ clothes are manufactured in developing countries, and this creates suspicion. Especially in terms of Finnish brands the fact that the clothes are manufactured in developing countries draw attention and not in a good way.” -Interviewee A*

Also, in various answers was brought up that the whole production process has an influence and that the transparency in the production process are things that create trust on the sustainability.

*“I try to evaluate the manufacturing process and try to find out where the clothes are made, do the employees get paid and how are their working conditions. If I know a brand that considers sustainability in their production and materials, it is the easiest choice for me as a consumer. ... I want to check who makes the product and where the materials come from” -Interviewee D*

*“I check the manufacturing process and evaluate the brand.” -Interviewee F*

Some interviewees explained that the brand has a big influence on the evaluation of sustainability. Also, the different services the brand offers may have an influence on the

perceived sustainability. Material of the product was mentioned to influence the perception of sustainability, product made from recycled materials was mentioned by four interviewees.

*“Brand is creating the image of how and where the product is made. There can be a conflict between these, as an example, a common Finnish brand may not be better than a large corporation, but it possible that the items are produced in factories next to each other.” -Interviewee I*

*“If the product is made from recycled materials, it is already a good thing and if the manufacturing process is clear, this creates trust. Some brands are offering repairing services for their clothes, and this influences on how sustainable I see the brand and the products.” -Interviewee B*

In terms of second-hand products, one interviewee explained that the fact that is purchasing when needed and that the product is long-lasting, that you can influence the life cycle of the product make the product sustainable. Various interviewees told that they do not check the same things when purchasing second-hand items, such as the manufacturing country and in some cases the brand. They mostly are concentrating on the quality and materials.

#### **5.4 Awareness of country of origin of the product and brand**

Country of origin of the product has come up earlier in the answers already, but at the latest the discussion of the country of origin resulted by these questions. Next is presented how aware the interviewees are on the brand, the brand origin and the manufacturing country of their own clothing selection. Most commonly, the people were aware on the brand selection, and when knowing the brand, mostly also knowing the brand origin. The awareness on country of origin of the product was varying. The interviewees described their awareness the following way.

*“I am aware of which brands can be found from my wardrobe, I do not know the brand origin in all cases and also do not know the manufacturing country in each. But my wardrobe have clothes from the time when I was not paying attention on the manufacturing country that much.” -Interviewee D*

*“My wardrobe includes various brands, and I am not that aware on the brand origin. I am also not entirely sure on the manufacturing country, but most clothes are made in developing countries, as I own old clothes and clothes that are bought second-hand.” - Interviewee G*

*“I have clothes from various brands, and I am aware on where the brands are from, and I prefer certain countries.” -Interviewee I*

*“If I buy the item new, I am aware of the brand and the brand origin. When I am buying second-hand products, the brand does not play such a big role. If I see an ultra-fast fashion brand in a flea market, I am leaving the product there since I do not want to support these brands in any case.” -Interviewee F*

*“I am aware on the brands and mostly about the brand origin. The manufacturing country is a question mark in almost all items.” -Interviewee A*

After going through how aware the interviewees are on the country of origin of both brand and the manufacturing country, was asked that is the brand origin or manufacturing country guiding the purchasing decisions. For most cases, it had an influence but also two interviewees explained that in the purchasing process it does not have a big role. First is introduced the answers to brand origin and then to manufacturing country.

Five interviewees explained that if the brand is Finnish, it mostly has a positive influence:

*“If I purchase an item by a Finnish brand, the base thought is that they are more sustainable, but I am aware that this is not always the case, but that is the initial thought.” -*

*Interviewee D*

*“Finnish brands do guide the purchasing decisions because I want to support them. I also am more aware of Finnish brands, than brands from other countries.” -Interviewee G*

*“It has an influence on the purchasing process, and I would like to support Finnish brands, but some Finnish brands at least are expensive, and the manufacturing countries may not be better than in some other brands.” -Interviewee A*

*“Yes, it guides my decisions, I intend to purchase clothes by Finnish brands.” -Interviewee*

*B*

Other countries were mentioned as well as other important factors.

*“European brands in general increase the trust a bit, but the manufacturing country has a bigger influence.” -Interviewee D*

*“I prefer brands from specific countries, such as Finland, France, Italy and Sweden.” -*

*Interviewee I*

*“It does have an effect but more it is to do with on what the brand presents, and the production process has an influence.” -Interviewee F*

The country of origin of the product developed rather similar thoughts compared to brand's origin.

*“Country of origin has an influence; I rather choose an item that is manufactured in Europe than in Asia. When comparing the European countries, the Nordic countries create more trust than Southern European countries.” -Interviewee G*

*“It has an influence; I rather not choose products made in developing countries.” -Interviewee H*

*“Somehow it is guiding the purchasing decision. When a clothing item is made in Finland, I see it as a good alternative. I also want to know where the clothing item is made in, and it does raise questions if the country is a developing country.” -Interviewee B*

When asked whether the mentioned manufacturing countries, such as the developing countries, were familiar to them, they mostly were not. Most explained that they have received information through different documentaries, the media overall, and through influencers in social media. One person had visited Southeast Asian countries, and have seen how the people live, there but it has not had a that big of a role, but documentaries have increased the awareness the most.

In the end, the interviewees were asked to inform a country that creates trust on the item to be sustainable and a country that does not create trust that the item would be sustainable.

*“Most commonly, the European countries creates trust, but most the Nordic countries compared to southern European countries.” -Interviewee G*

*“Clothes made in the Nordic countries and in Finland creates trust. I also have get acquainted with Baltic countries and their manufacturing and have understood that they concentrate on the working conditions. Clothes made in Asia does not increase trust.” -Interviewee H*

*“Clothes made in Finland create trust on the sustainability aspect whereas Asian countries do not.” -Interviewee A*

*“Clothes are made in various countries and therefore, it is difficult to name one country. I am able to trust factories by specific brands and they are located in Turkey and Portugal. Asian countries usually create suspicion on the process. If a clothing item is made in Europe or Finland, I believe the working conditions at least are better than in the Asian countries.” -Interviewee F*

*“Western countries, such as European countries creates trust whereas developing countries create suspicion.” -Interviewee D*

## **5.5 Discussion**

As explained earlier, all the interviewees consider sustainability in their fashion consumption. The level of sustainable actions was different as well as the ways to consume in a sustainable way. The interviewees also had other sustainable habits in their lives, such as recycling, being vegetarians, or eating less meat, traveling with public transportation, and consumption behaviour overall. Through the interviews was also brought up the worry towards the current situation in the world and also anxiety on how to behave in a better way to have a good influence on the world.

The primary way to act in a more sustainable way was decreasing the number of purchased items. All the interviewees were still consuming but had decreased their consumption a lot. Also, most interviewees concentrated on not making unnecessary purchases or impulse purchases which was also seen as a sustainable habit. The interviewees are therefore aware of the issues of fashion industry as well as the consumption-based society and its issues (Wiedmann, Lenzen, Keyßer, & Steinberger, 2020) For various interviewees this was the easiest way to influence on the sustainable habits. The reason for this sustainable habit was for many that it is the easiest step towards sustainable consumption but also the fact, that as an individual consumer is it difficult to make

sustainable purchasing decisions as you need to do background checks and there may be some things you cannot find out.

When going more into the way to consume, there are more aspects of sustainability. All the interviewees explained about environmental and/or social sustainability and wanting to have an influence on these issues with their consumption behaviour. On the environmental aspect the interviewees brought up emissions, carbon footprint and how fashion industry is consuming natural resources. In a more specific way, one interviewee brought up, how different toxic materials are used in the processes, and these are released to nature and this way affecting the environmental aspect. Only one person mentioned the industry's logistical influence on the planet. On the social aspect, the interviewees brought up the working conditions of the employees, and how they normally are not that great, at least in some quite common manufacturing country. Also, the issue of people not receiving living wage and child labour was mentioned. Lastly, three interviewees mentioned that they feel that they "need" to act in a more sustainable way, but they had other reasons for their consumption behaviour as well.

The problematic linear supply chain of fashion industry was brought up by a few interviewees. According to Fung, Choi and Liu (2020) and Patwa and Seetharaman (2019) the issue in fashion industry is the fact that the supply chain is linear, and it leaves the end open. The industry should move towards circular economy, but that is not the case yet. One interviewee mentioned that she had a problem with clothes that were not good enough to give forward, but the material was still okay to use. However, she could not find a service that would receive these kinds of clothes. This interviewee saw this problematic as this creates more waste and then new material needs to be created. Another interviewee explained that there are so much old clothes but there are not so many solutions to recycle the clothes or the material. Also, few interviewees brought up how circular economy should be essential part of the industry. Two interviewees mentioned that they are fixing the clothes themselves, and this way trying to add time to the life cycle of the item, but it is not a full solution to the linear supply chain.

Related to the circular economy, the items can be evaluated through life cycle assessment. Life cycle assessment considers the manufacturing process from acquiring the material until the phase the item is not used anymore and what happens in the end of the life cycle (International Organisation for Standardisation [ISO], 2016). Various interviewees concentrated on prolonging the life cycle of the items, mostly concentrating on the use phase. The ways for prolong the life cycle was through purchasing products that would be used for a longer period, through recycling the items after use and purchasing second-hand items which already prolongs the life cycle of the item. Two interviewees brought up the fact that they also try to prolong the life cycle with their own actions, such as taking care of the products and not washing the item after every use and doing spot cleaning when needed instead of washing the item. Two interviewees also mentioned that they fix their clothes when they broke to prolong the life cycle of the item. What comes to the prolonging the life cycle before the use phase, four interviewees mentioned that they have purchased items that are made from recycled materials, which is creating circular aspect to the supply chain. The length of the clothing item was essential for various interviewees, and this was thought to be an essential part of the sustainable consumption.

In the theory section was mentioned different collaborative consumption options, but no interviewee mentioned utilizing them. The interview questionnaire did not have questions directly related to collaborative options, and therefore it is not possible to say whether some people were or were not using them. Most commonly second-hand options were brought up as alternatives for purchasing new items.

The target was to find out whether country of origin has an influence on the perception of an item's sustainability, and most interviewees mentioned the manufacturing country in one way or another before the specific questions related to it. Mostly the interviewees mentioned the manufacturing country when explaining on what they check before purchasing a product, as for many the manufacturing country already indicates somethings



related to the manufacturing process. For some it implies about the working conditions of the employees whereas for some others it indicates about the quality of the product. Also, for some interviewees it is part of the process of whether to purchase the product or not, as they are boycotting specific countries as manufacturing countries. The manufacturing country was mentioned also related to mass production and how some of the interviewees do not want to support fast fashion or mass production. All the interviewees were aware of the manufacturing countries on some level, at least acknowledging the possible ones and for all the interviewees the developing countries as manufacturing country did not create trust on the sustainability of the item. Specifically, the developing countries as manufacturing country decreased the trust on social aspect of sustainability. This was explained through how employees working conditions have been visible in media or different documentaries. However, this did not influence all the interviewees' purchasing decisions. Many interviewees mentioned that a big part of the clothes is manufactured in Asia, and almost all the interviewees mentioned having clothes which are manufactured in these countries. Some of these items were bought second-hand but some also new. All the interviewees saw European countries as the better choice for manufacturing country, as they can trust the working conditions are better and thus the item can be seen as more sustainable.

The interviewees brought up that the manufacturing country does not tell everything how the product is manufactured, but it gives insight and therefore some interviewees are checking the country of manufacturing in the purchasing process, especially when they are not familiar with the brand. The country of origin has a halo effect in this process as the consumer does not have prior knowledge on the brand and its products. (Han, 1989) Also, few interviewees mentioned that they prefer certain countries as a brand origin and/or manufacturing country and this is due to having good experiences with these countries related to previous clothing items. Few interviewees explained that even though the manufacturing country would be a developing country, the quality of the product may still be good, but there still can be some issues in the process such as the logistical costs for the environment or the working conditions. In general, the

interviewees believe that clothes made in Finland are of good quality and the working conditions are good. Ethnocentrism may explain that Finland is thought to be a good choice in terms of sustainability. Few interviewees also mentioned that they have done background checks for some brands and found some factories that are working in a sustainable and transparent way. The transparency of the manufacturing process was thought to be important by five interviewees. Related to the importance of transparent manufacturing process, two interviewees explained about the complex manufacturing processes, and how the “made in” label only shows the final manufacturing country. Both these interviewees emphasized the importance of transparent manufacturing process.

The country of origin can influence people as performance-related or performance-unrelated aspect (Kock, et al., 2019). In all the cases the country of origin had an influence through the performance-related aspect. The people had some sort of country image, and it already was connected to the product category. This was clear especially when it comes to the developing countries as a manufacturing country. All the interviewees are aware that a big part of clothes is made in developing countries. In this case, the performance-related image does not have a positive influence on the product but rather a negative one. The performance-unrelated aspect did not rise in any interviews.

Brand origin was not brought up in a negative light in terms of sustainability. Few interviewees mentioned that they have brands they prefer and thus also brand origins they prefer. In a positive way the brand origin was mentioned if the brand was a Finnish one and for most interviewees also if the product is manufactured in some other Nordic country. One interviewee mentioned that there are some similar values shared already as the brand is from a country nearby. Most interviewees mentioned that the fact that the brand is Finnish does not alone create trust, but some other aspects need to be investigated. Examples of this was to find out the manufacturing country or some more information about the brand.

With manufacturing country, the evaluation process was a bit more straightforward. The manufacturing country has a bigger influence on how sustainable the product is seen. The negative influence was mostly created in case the manufacturing country was a developing country. However, it may have not influenced the purchasing intention. On the other hand, the manufacturing country could have a positive influence, when the manufacturing country was a European country, and especially if the product is made in Finland.

In a most clear way, the demographic factors influencing the actions is with interviewee H, who has a child. In this case, there is rather often needs to purchase new items as the child needs regularly new clothing items, compared to other interviewees who are trying to reduce the number of purchases. In this case example, the financial aspect, the quality of the product as well as the life cycle of the product were important to the interviewee H. Both financial aspect and the quality are twisted around prolonging the life cycle, as the interviewee H mentioned that she wants to purchase items, that are of good quality so that the life cycle would be longer for the individual user as well as in total, that more than one child could wear the item. In addition, if the quality is better, the product may be more expensive, but interviewee H mentioned that she rather purchases a bit more expensive one than purchases regularly a cheaper alternative.

Two interviewees mentioned that they worry about the future and about the planet and get also a bit anxious towards climate change. One of these interviewees also emphasized the difficulty to select a sustainable choice, and therefore she rather is not making purchases or then purchases the needed products second-hand. For the other interviewee the most common way to consume in a sustainable way was to decrease the number of purchased items.

Two interviewees who mentioned that they make clothes themselves concentrated on the social sustainability aspect as they worry about the employees' working conditions. Both these interviewees also mentioned the environmental side of the sustainability.

As already mentioned, the level of the sustainable consumption was different for these interviewees. For all it was about consuming less new products. Some were consuming second-hand options as they were seen to be a better alternative, and these purchases might also include some spontaneous purchase behaviour. Others were concentrating on not purchasing fast fashion or making more detailed background checks for the brands, manufacturing process and the product. Interviewee F emphasized that she does not want to purchase new if not needed, as there are good alternatives found second-hand, and the fact that she does not want to consume virgin materials. Interviewee F had also had the difficult experience on how to recycle good, usable material that cannot be used in that form of a clothing item anymore. For interviewee E the transparency in the manufacturing process was important as well as the personal need. He also mostly checks the brand, manufacturing country and whole manufacturing process but the most important thing is that there is a need behind the purchase. Both interviewee E and interviewee F had found few factories that have a transparent manufacturing process and there are explained in more detail about the process and pictures of the factory as well as the working conditions are visible on the website. Through finding these few factories, for them it is easier to make a purchase decision, as they know more about the whole process.

For most interviewees the purchasing process in terms of new clothing item was long. Various interviewees mentioned that they do background checks and make sure that they really need the product and would use it for long, and therefore the purchasing process is rather long. Whereas in terms of second-hand purchase some are making spontaneous purchasing decisions, and making the purchase decision faster if they find an item they have had before, or a clothing item that they have been thinking to purchase. For one interviewee the length of the process went the other way around. The second-hand purchases he makes are rather specific, and therefore finding the right item can take time, as he wishes to purchase it second-hand. On the other hand, he sometimes can make rather spontaneous purchasing decisions when purchasing new, as he

has a need that is rather urgent and then he goes to a store he knows he will find the right kind of items and makes the purchase without doing that much background checks.

## **6 Conclusion**

The topic of the thesis was understanding consumer's views on sustainability of fashion items and whether country of origin effect has an influence on it. The topic was first gone through theory section presenting previous studies in the field and general information related to sustainability and country of origin. Also, qualitative research was conducted to get the views of consumers on the topic. As there was no prior research studying the same topic, the results have brought new insight to the topic.

The research concentrated on the consumers views on sustainable consumption, the reasons for it and is country of origin part of the process. In various interviews the country of origin was brought up before the specific questions related to the topic, which already shows that the country of origin has a role in the process, whether it influences the actual purchasing process or not.

### **6.1 Key findings and theoretical contribution**

The study concentrated on sustainable consumption and which aspects are influencing interviewees' thoughts and views on sustainability. In the research the different sustainability aspects, environmental and social, were mentioned to be important for most. The reasons behind sustainable consumption were mostly the environmental and/or social reasons and the fact that the consumption as it is happening now is not sustainable and something needs to be done. The interviewees also had more personal reasons for sustainable consumption, such as financial aspect, having interest and/or pressure to act in the right way, and overall, the big picture of own actions.

Sustainable consumption was seen in different ways, but the most common attribute was to consume less and thus decreasing the influence of own actions. After the decrease of purchase, also second-hand consumption, making background checks on brands and pursuing to make a sustainable choice were mentioned.

The research question in this study was *“How is country of origin influencing consumer’s perception of sustainability of a clothing item?”*

As already mentioned, country of origin became part of the discussion in most interviews before any specific questions related to it were asked. Country of origin was influencing the consumers through performance-related aspect. This refers to consumers having an image on the country, and it has a connection with the product category. (Kock, et al., 2019) All the interviewees were familiar with the common manufacturing countries, such as countries in Asia and Europe and the answers were concentrating on these specific areas. In case of the Asian countries as a manufacturing country, the performance-related image had a negative influence on the evaluation of the product’s sustainability.

The country of origin in this thesis concentrated on both the brand origin and the manufacturing country. Before the country-of-origin specific questions only manufacturing country was brought up as an influential attribute by the interviewees. Brand origin did not create that much negative influence in terms of sustainability, as the interviewees mostly concentrated on brands that are common for them, or Finnish brands as few interviewees mentioned that they wish to support Finnish brands. For all the interviewees the concept of brand origin was not that familiar, and all the interviewees were not aware of the brand origin in some brands familiar to them. Alone the brand origin being Finland, does not generate reliable image, but adding some attributes to it, does have a positive influence or in other cases may decrease the trust. Most commonly the manufacturing country was mentioned in this case, as few interviewees mentioned that it does not create trust if the brand is from Finland or other Nordic country and manufacturing is happening in a developing country. This has a big influence on the purchase behavior as well. Compared to if the manufacturing country would be in Europe or in Finland as an example, it already gives the insight that the item is a more sustainable one, and the employees are treated well.

Manufacturing country guided the evaluation of a product more than the brand origin. Developing countries as a manufacturing country was decreasing the trust related to sustainability. In all cases, it did not prevent the purchase to happen, but commonly the item was not thought to be sustainable if it is produced in a developing country. This was due to the image given by media and documentaries, that the working conditions are not that good, and thus the social sustainability has a big role in this evaluation. On the other hand, if the manufacturing country was a European country, it did have a positive influence on the sustainability, and in more detail the social sustainability, as the interviewees had the view that the employees are treated better in Europe. In these evaluations the environmental aspect did not raise such importance compared to social sustainability. However, the environmental aspects mentioned related to sustainability were having a negative influence such as the logistical influence and how the environmental aspect is not taken into consideration that much in the developing countries, or at least this was the initial thought the interviewees had.

The research is increasing knowledge on how consumers evaluate the sustainability of a clothing item and how country-of-origin is influencing this process. The research result of country-of-origin having an influence on the view of sustainability, is supporting previous research on the field of country-of-origin. According to Han (1989) and Ha-Brookshire and Yoon (2012) country-of-origin is influencing consumers' views on the products quality and according to Magnusson, Westjohn and Zdravkovic (2011) the country of origin does have an influence on the consumer even though the perceived country may not be the correct one. As the relation of country-of-origin effect and sustainability in the fashion industry was not studied before, this research has created preliminary views on what is the significance of country-of-origin in the process of evaluating the sustainability aspect a clothing item.



## 6.2 Managerial implications

As the study was made to consumers, the results give insight on how consumers see sustainability, how they evaluate different aspects of sustainability and how it influences their purchasing behavior.

In various interviews was repeated that they have decreased the number of purchased items and they want to make only necessary purchases. Also, the responsibility of companies and governments in terms of sustainable consumption was brought up as it should not only be in the hands of consumers.

Related to companies' own communication, it was important to various interviewees that the company is talking about sustainability in their website as an example, and the more concrete actions, the better. One interviewee mentioned that a company had increased the volume they are producing clothing items and they did not share any sustainability values in their website. In this case, the interviewee did not want to support the company anymore but chose to purchase from another company. Also, the transparency in the manufacturing process and sustainability reporting was mentioned as key elements of companies' communication.

## 6.3 Limitations and future research

In all research there are limitations, and thus is the case in this one as well. First, the research was done as qualitative research which decreases the number of respondents, but of course is creating deeper thoughts on the topic. Second, the field the research concentrated was fashion industry, and therefore the results cannot be generalized to other fields or industries. Third, the study concentrated on Finnish consumers' views only.

There are different ways the topic could be studied in the future. The topic could be studied through quantitative research and therefore get a larger number of respondents and get some generalizable data on the views on sustainability. Also, similar kind of

research could be done when studying a different field and see, whether the results are industry-specific or there are some similarities regardless of the industry in question. Fashion industry is a well-research area, but for future research, other fields should be studied as well. In addition, the study could be executed in another country, as in this research, Finland was mentioned as a trustworthy manufacturing country and also positive thoughts was created of Finnish brands.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview guide

- What do you generally think about sustainability and responsibility and does sustainability play a role in your life or your choices?
- Have you always wanted to consume sustainably? and if not, what made you change your consumption habits?
  - prompts: How responsible consumption is visible in your life?
  - prompts: What are the biggest reasons for you to consume in a sustainable way?
- When you are in the process of buying a new clothing item, how does this process usually go? (starting from the idea of getting a new item to the actual purchase), tell examples of two latest purchases.
  - prompts: How much do you do background checks beforehand, do you know beforehand what you are buying or are you comparing the alternatives when in store?
  - prompt: What are you emphasizing on the selection of new clothing item?
- How do you evaluate the sustainability aspect of a clothing item? / Or that it supports sustainability?
  - (two last purchases)
  - prompt: What do you emphasize on this evaluation?
- Are you always acting in a sustainable way in your purchases?
  - prompt: why / why not?
  - prompt: If you do not always follow sustainable values, is there something that you follow in each purchase situation?
- if you are thinking about the clothing selection you have at the moment, do you own several brand's clothes?
  - prompt: Are you aware of the country of origin of the brand?
  - prompt: Are you aware of the manufacturing country?
- Is the country of origin of the clothing item and / or the country of origin of the brand guiding your decision / does it have an effect to your purchasing decisions?
  - How about the manufacturing country`?
  - prompt: What thoughts does this manufacturing country bring out in you?
    - Familiarity with the country, thoughts on sustainability?
- Are you able to name a brand or country of origin, which makes you trust the clothing item's sustainability? As well as an example, that does not create trust?