A Study on the Implementation Drivers and Challenges of Sustainability Strategies of International Luxury Groups in the Mainland Chinese Market

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Abstract

This study examines how the sustainability strategies of international luxury groups are understood, translated and implemented in the mainland Chinese luxury market. It adopts a qualitative research design based on fifteen semi-structured interviews with relevant practitioners. The interview data were analysed through thematic analysis.

Findings show that sustainability is generally understood as a long-term strategic direction. Its implementation depends on local translation into business practices, including supply chain management, store operations, performance assessment and consumer communication. This process is shaped by cost pressure, short-term sales targets, weak cross-functional coordination, supplier capability and consumer acceptance.

Sustainability value can also create tensions with traditional luxury value. Consumers may recognise sustainability, but their purchase decisions still focus on product design, quality, price, brand experience and premium feel. This study adds practice-based understanding of sustainability implementation in international luxury groups. It suggests that sustainability strategies need to enter local management systems, supply chain processes, store-level execution and consumer communication to become more genuine and continuous practices in the mainland Chinese market.

Keywords: sustainability strategies; international luxury groups; mainland Chinese luxury market; local translation; sustainability implementation; store-level execution; luxury-sustainability value tension

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Industry and Market Context

In recent years, sustainable development has become an unavoidable issue for the global luxury goods industry. With the continuous rise in environmental and social responsibility requirements, as well as the expansion of the morally conscious consumer base, luxury enterprises are under pressure from regulatory authorities, investors, and relevant laws, transforming the sustainable issue from a focus on corporate image and communication to a core topic in strategic discussions (Hare, 2024). At the same time, Statista (2024) shows that Asia, especially Greater China, has become increasingly important in the global luxury goods system. In 2023, the Asian luxury goods market reached approximately US$194.1 billion, making it one of the largest regional markets and an important area for the future growth and strategic planning of international luxury groups. More recent industry analysis shows that the mainland Chinese personal luxury market remains strategically important, despite entering a period of market adjustment and gradual recovery. In 2025, the market contracted by 3%–5%, but showed signs of recovery from the third quarter, while 65% of Chinese luxury spending took place within mainland China. This suggests that China remains a key market for international luxury brands to understand local consumers and market conditions (Lannes et al., 2026).

However, the Asian luxury goods market shows significant regional differences in consumption culture, regulatory conditions and business environments, highlighting the heterogeneity and complexity of this market at the institutional and cultural levels (Weiskopf, 2024).

These regional differences indicate that the broader Asian market may be too diverse to be treated as a single analytical context in this study. Therefore, this study narrows its focus from the broader Asian market to the mainland Chinese luxury market. This adjustment is based on the first-hand interview data collected for this study, mainly from practitioners working in or closely related to this market. Focusing on mainland China helps keep the research scope, participant experience and interview data consistent, while avoiding the use of evidence from mainland China to represent the wider Asian market.

1.2 Research Problem and Motivation

Against this industry and market background, the practical challenges faced by luxury groups in promoting sustainability have become more visible. Although sustainable development has received extensive attention in business management and research, the related discussions have mostly focused on the definition of concepts, performance evaluation, and information disclosure, while paying relatively limited attention to the process of formulating and implementing sustainability strategies within organisations (Crews, 2010).

Previous studies based on the analysis of luxury groups' sustainability reports have found that although enterprises emphasize their sustainable development commitments and set corresponding strategic goals at the public level, these commitments often show selective disclosure and insufficient execution in reports and related management practices, making it difficult to accurately assess their true sustainable performance (Wells et al., 2021). For international luxury groups, sustainability strategies are usually formulated at the global or group level, but they need to be translated through practices at different brand, business unit, and market levels. This structure may make the communication and implementation of sustainability strategies more complex. In the context of the mainland Chinese market, this process may be influenced by local operations, material and supply chain practices, cost pressures, consumer responses, and the perception of the relationship between sustainability and luxury values. Therefore, this study examines how sustainability strategies are understood, translated, and implemented in the mainland

Chinese luxury market.

To address this issue, this study draws on first-hand interview data from relevant practitioners working in or closely related to the mainland Chinese market. The research aim and questions are presented in the next section, followed by the methodology section, which explains the research design, participant selection and data analysis process.

1.3 Research Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to examine how the sustainability strategies of international luxury groups are understood, translated and implemented in the mainland Chinese luxury market. Based on this aim, the study is guided by three research questions that focus on strategic understanding, practical translation, and the main factors shaping implementation.

RQ1: How are the sustainability strategies of international luxury groups understood by relevant practitioners in the mainland Chinese market?

This question focuses on how participants understand the nature of sustainability strategies, including whether they see sustainability as a long-term direction, corporate responsibility, compliance requirement, industry trend, or part of long-term brand value.

RQ2: How are these sustainability strategies translated into concrete practices in the mainland Chinese market?

This question focuses on whether and how sustainability goals enter actual work practices, such as operations management, regional execution, retail practices, product development, material selection, supply chain collaboration, KPI, or consumer communication.

RQ3: What main factors influence the implementation of sustainability strategies in the mainland Chinese market?

This question focuses on the drivers, practical barriers and value tensions in the implementation process, such as cost pressure, supply chain coordination, organisational coordination, consumer response, and the relationship between sustainability and traditional luxury values.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sustainability Transformation in the Luxury Industry

Campos Franco et al. (2019) indicate that sustainability in the luxury industry is increasingly being understood as a systemic practice that integrates environmental, social and economic goals throughout the entire value chain. It is also moving beyond superficial communication or isolated projects. Embedding sustainable concepts in organizational aspects such as production, supply chain management, technological innovation, and performance measurement helps to form a sustainable practice logic that goes beyond short-term publicity and features continuous integration and long-term orientation.

In the context of the luxury goods industry, sustainable development is often advanced through institutionalised arrangements at the group level, such as establishing dedicated environmental management departments or introducing comprehensive performance measurement tools, to support the long-term integration of environmental and social responsibility at the organizational level (Arrigo, 2015).

Meanwhile, Herciu and Şerban (2016) point out that the luxury industry has gradually shifted from an early structure dominated by independent brands to an industry form led by large multi-brand groups. Through mergers and acquisitions as well as integration, these luxury groups play a core role in resource allocation, knowledge sharing, and strategic coordination, thus becoming important decision-making and governance entities in the industry.

On this basis, research in the field of strategic management further emphasizes that sustainable development has gradually been incorporated into the core strategic issues of enterprises. Baumgartner and Rauter (2017) further argue that the lack of a clear strategic orientation is one of the important reasons why enterprises have made limited progress in the field of sustainable development, highlighting the necessity of understanding the sustainable transformation of enterprises from the perspective of strategic management.

Therefore, in the luxury fashion industry, sustainability is increasingly seen as a long-term strategic transformation. For international luxury groups, this strategy requires group-level coordination and needs to be translated into concrete practices in local markets, particularly the mainland Chinese market.

2.2 Institutional and Governance Perspectives on Sustainability in Luxury Groups

In this study, institutional theory helps explain the external norms, expectations and legitimacy pressures faced by luxury groups when promoting sustainability. Corporate governance and institutional governance perspectives further help explain how luxury groups respond to these pressures through organisational arrangements, management mechanisms and local implementation in the mainland Chinese market.
From the perspective of organisations and institutions, luxury groups' promotion of sustainable development is not entirely based on their own choices. It also reflects a response to external norms and social expectations in a highly institutionalised industry environment. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argued that enterprises do not make decisions independently, but rather observe and learn from each other in a common institutional environment, gradually adopting similar practices, thus making the entire industry tend to be consistent in organizational form and practice. Therefore, understanding enterprise behaviour requires placing it in the overall organisational environment and considering more than individual enterprises themselves. Organisational behaviour is jointly influenced by multiple institutional elements such as rules, norms, and shared cognition, which constitute the legitimacy basis for organizational actions (Richard, 2008). These elements also shape different response patterns of enterprises to sustainable development issues.

Under this institutional framework, different industries, due to their distinct symbolic meanings and social roles, are subject to varying degrees of institutional pressure.

Against the backdrop of sustainable development becoming a global normative issue, luxury goods, due to their symbolic association with resource consumption and social inequality, are under greater institutional and public opinion pressure. As a result, they are expected to play a leading role in sustainable practices and thereby maintain their social legitimacy (Kapferer, 2021).

However, according to Ziegler (2005), this normative expectation cannot be achieved through a single policy and becomes a governance challenge that spans multiple levels and organisations. From an institutional governance perspective, sustainable development is defined as a long-term normative issue established "outside-in" at the international level, and its implementation relies on communication, coordination, and execution at the local level by various organisations, making it a highly complex institutional implementation challenge.

This implementation complexity is particularly prominent in multi-brand and multi-level enterprise groups. Meanwhile, Aras and Crowther (2008) research indicates that the existing evidence is not sufficient to prove that corporate governance itself necessarily improves sustainable performance. However, when enterprises can have a clearer understanding of the relationship between sustainable development and corporate governance, their responses to related issues tend to be more comprehensive, and this relationship may gradually become apparent with the improvement of information disclosure and transparency.

In the multi-brand and multi-level organizational structure of luxury goods groups, sustainable development often needs to be coordinated and implemented through governance mechanisms at the group level. Existing research regards enterprises as key actors in addressing environmental sustainability challenges and systematically reviews the roles of internal governance subjects such as shareholders, boards of directors, CEOs, senior management teams, and employees in shaping environmental sustainability outcomes from the perspective of corporate governance. It points out that sustainable development is not driven by a single decision-maker but relies on the coordination and institutional arrangements among multi-level governance subjects (Aguilera et al., 2021).

From the perspective of institutions and governance, enterprise groups often respond to sustainability requirements through governance structures. The key issue is how these institutional arrangements become workable practices in specific market contexts. This issue is particularly relevant to the implementation of sustainability strategies by international luxury groups in the mainland Chinese market.

2.3 Strategic Pathways for Sustainability Implementation

Firstly, strategic integration at the group level is regarded as a crucial prerequisite for the implementation of sustainability. Baumgartner (2014) suggests that for enterprises to promote sustainable development, it is often necessary to carry out strategic integration at the group level. By clarifying the overall direction and long-term goals, it provides coordination and guidance for the specific implementation of different business units and brands. At the same time, sustainability implementation is not limited to strategic planning at the group level. Practical experiences from business units may also inform later strategic adjustments.

Secondly, in practice, enterprise groups usually establish formal governance and management mechanisms to promote the coordination and implementation of sustainable issues within the organization. Relevant research indicates that a sustainability committee at the board level, as a formal governance mechanism, can clarify the responsibility for sustainable issues at the top management level and provide continuous supervision and coordination. In this way, enterprises can more easily transform abstract sustainable goals into specific and manageable action priorities (Burke et al., 2017). Additionally, Azapagic (2003b) identifies a key management approach for enterprises to promote sustainable implementation. This approach involves embedding sustainability issues systematically into corporate planning and processes through a structured sustainable management system.

Thirdly, in practice, to support the implementation of sustainable practices, enterprise groups often rely on a series of standardized tools and processes. Relevant research indicates that through standardized internal and external reporting procedures and a unified sustainable indicator system, enterprises can enhance communication, supervision, and comparison within the organization, thereby providing a foundation for the coordinated advancement of sustainable practices (Azapagic, 2003a). Furthermore, according to Tanzil and Beloff (2006), in addition to reporting systems, enterprises also set up sustainable indicators at the corporate level as independent management tools to continuously monitor and manage sustainability-related issues within the organization.

Overall, existing research suggests that corporate sustainability implementation is usually supported by a set of connected pathways. In international luxury groups, strategic integration and governance mechanisms help coordinate sustainability goals at the group level. These goals then need to be translated into concrete practices at the brand, regional and local market levels. This provides a basis for examining their implementation in the mainland Chinese market.

2.4 Challenges and Tensions in Implementation

Although sustainable development has been regarded as a core business issue by the majority of senior managers in large enterprises, it still faces significant implementation challenges in practice, mainly due to the fact that enterprises need to balance social, environmental, and economic goals under uncertainty and short-term performance pressure (Epstein & Buhovac, 2010). In the actual implementation process, a sustainable commitment at the strategic level does not necessarily translate smoothly into specific practices at the organizational level. Engert and Baumgartner (2016), based on a case study, demonstrated that even when a company has clearly embedded sustainability into its core strategy and shown a high level of commitment, the transformation of this strategy into the daily operations and management practices of the organization still faces significant challenges. The implementation itself constitutes a highly complex and prone-to-misalignment process.

Against the backdrop of sustainable development gradually becoming a core issue for enterprises, its actual promotion at the organizational level is often accompanied by internal tensions and implementation deviations. Essentially, enterprise sustainable development requires organisations to simultaneously address multiple goals such as economic, environmental, and social. However, these goals often contain tensions and contradictions in practice, and this inherent conflict constitutes a persistent structural feature in sustainable practices (Hahn et al., 2015). Meanwhile, Graafland and Smid (2016) pointed out that even if enterprises have formulated CSR policies, promoted related projects and disclosed them, these institutionalised practices may still fail to produce actual social and environmental effects due to inadequate implementation. This indicates that governance and disclosure do not directly determine performance. Their impact depends largely on the specific implementation process.

In addition to internal coordination and governance challenges, the effectiveness of sustainable practices in the luxury goods industry may also be affected by consumer consumption characteristics and the complexity of production and supply chains. Existing research indicates that luxury consumption, due to its low frequency and symbolic significance, is often regarded as a special experience that temporarily elevates consumers from the pressures of daily life. In this context, sustainable issues such as production methods and supply chains are usually not important considerations for consumers in their purchasing decisions, thus creating a tension between sustainable awareness in daily consumption and luxury purchases (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2017). In addition, luxury products create unique value by transcending conventional standards. This pursuit of "extremity" and differentiation makes their production and supply chain typically more complex and challenging than those of ordinary products. Due to the reliance on highly craft-oriented production processes and rare or hard-to-obtain materials, the supply chain of luxury goods often struggles to achieve high efficiency in reducing the negative environmental impact of the production process, and in some cases, it is almost impossible (Heil & Langer, 2017).

Taken together, these studies show that sustainability implementation faces several practical challenges. Further research is still needed to explain how these challenges shape the local translation of global sustainability strategies in international luxury groups. In the mainland Chinese market, this process involves both internal execution issues and external market conditions, including cost pressure, supply chain coordination, consumer response and luxury-sustainability tensions. This provides the basis for the next section, which summarizes previous studies and clarifies the research gap addressed in this study.

2.5 Summary of Previous Studies and Research Gap

Based on the previous discussion, previous studies have analysed the sustainability in the luxury industry from perspectives such as corporate strategy, sustainability disclosure, implementation obstacles, and consumer responses. Campos Franco et al. (2019) regarded sustainability as a long-term strategy and value chain practice for luxury fashion enterprises, emphasizing the importance of transparency, systematic management, and long-term business transformation. Other research based on corporate reports and environmental statements, pointing out that there might still be issues such as incomplete information, insufficient details at the brand level, and selective presentation in the sustainability disclosure of luxury groups (Wells et al., 2021). These indicate that luxury enterprises have incorporated sustainability into their strategies and disclosure systems, but how their commitments can be translated into actual business practices still requires further discussion.

In addition to discussions at the strategic and disclosure levels, research has also begun to examine practical barriers in sustainability implementation. Bhandari et al. (2022) analysed barriers to sustainable sourcing in the apparel and fashion-luxury sector, showing that these barriers mainly involve management and infrastructure support, raw material supply, financial pressure, supplier cooperation, certification requirements, and consumer perceptions. This research further suggests that sustainability implementation in the luxury industry depends on practical conditions such as procurement, supply chains, financial pressure, and collaboration, as well as corporate strategies and public commitments.

Consumer-level studies mainly examine how sustainable fashion or sustainable luxury affects consumer attitudes, purchase intention, and value judgements. Kong and Ko (2017) compared consumer decision-making toward sustainable fashion products in South Korea, China and Japan. They found that consumer evaluations of sustainable fashion are shaped not only by environmental awareness, but also by product value, perceived risk and cultural differences. Lim et al. (2023) focused on Chinese luxury fashion consumers and found that pro-environmental values can increase willingness to pay a premium for sustainable luxury by strengthening consumer engagement. Zhao et al. (2023) reviewed research on sustainable luxury and consumer purchase intention, showing that sustainable luxury may increase or reduce purchase intention depending on consumers' perceptions of quality, functionality, brand consistency and market context. Dinh et al. (2024) pointed out that consumers' attitudes towards the sustainability of luxury brands are the main factor influencing their willingness to purchase sustainable high-end fashion, while factors such as hedonic value, scarcity, and conformity in luxury consumption also have an impact.

In order to present the main directions of the above studies more clearly, Table 2.1 summarizes the representative literature most relevant to this study and summarizes its research purpose, methods and main findings.

Table 2.1 Summary of Previous Studies Related to Luxury Sustainability

Source	**Purpose**	**Method**	**Key findings**
Campos Franco et al. (2019)	Examines sustainability challenges faced by luxury fashion firms and how firms respond to these challenges.	Literature review and multiple-case examples, using the triple bottom line framework.	Luxury brands can advance sustainability through transparent, long-term and systematic strategies.
Wells et al. (2021)	Examines the credibility of environmental sustainability claims made by luxury conglomerates, using LVMH and Kering as cases.	Corpus-assisted discourse analysis of LVMH and Kering’s environmental reports, based on GRI guidelines.	Sustainability disclosure lacks brand-level detail and shows uneven reporting quality. Selective reporting weakens the credibility of sustainability claims.
Bhandari et al. (2022)	Identifies and ranks key barriers to sustainable sourcing in the apparel and fashion-luxury sector.	Survey of 154 global sustainable sourcing professionals, using EFA and AHP analysis.	Barriers to sustainable sourcing involve management support, raw material supply, financial pressure, supplier cooperation and customer perceptions.

Source	Purpose	Method	Key findings
Kong and Ko (2017)	Compares consumer decision-making toward sustainable fashion products in South Korea, China and Japan.	Questionnaire survey of 933 consumers in South Korea, China and Japan, using SEM and multiple-group analysis.	Purchase intention is shaped by perceived value and perceived risk. Positive attitudes do not always lead to stronger purchase intention.
Lim et al. (2023)	Examines factors influencing Chinese consumers' willingness to pay a premium price for sustainable luxury products.	Questionnaire survey of 296 Chinese luxury fashion consumers, using PLS path modeling.	Consumer pro-environmental values are key drivers of engagement and willingness to pay a premium price for sustainable luxury.
Zhao et al. (2023)	Reviews current research on sustainable luxury and consumer purchase intention.	Systematic literature review of 52 articles from Scopus and Web of Science.	Sustainable luxury has context-dependent effects on purchase intention. It may increase purchase intention, but may also reduce it when perceived quality, functionality or brand consistency is weakened.
Dinh et al. (2024)	Examines how sustainability and traditional luxury values shape purchase intention toward sustainable high-end fashion.	Survey of around 300 Vietnamese luxury consumers, using PLS-SEM.	Attitude is the strongest driver of purchase intention, followed by hedonic value, exclusivity and conformity.

As shown in Table 2.1, previous studies have examined luxury sustainability from several perspectives, including corporate strategy and disclosure, sustainable procurement, consumer responses and luxury value tensions. These studies have provided an important foundation for understanding luxury sustainability, but their focus remains relatively scattered. Enterprise-level research mainly explains how sustainability commitments are proposed and disclosed. Implementation-level research focuses on barriers in specific stages. Consumer-level research examines how consumers evaluate or purchase sustainable products. Less attention has been paid to how the sustainability strategies of international luxury groups are understood, translated and implemented in specific local markets.

Based on this summary, the research gap of this study can be clarified in three aspects.

First, existing studies mainly focus on corporate-level sustainability commitments, ESG disclosure and strategic statements by international luxury groups. Less attention has been paid to how these sustainability strategies are applied in local work settings and carried out by different roles. In particular, there is still limited explanation of how local teams understand sustainability goals, translate them into work priorities and implement them in daily practice.

Second, methodologically, much of the current literature relies on corporate reports, brand cases or consumer attitude studies. Fewer studies use first-hand interviews with practitioners related to the mainland Chinese market to examine the actual implementation process of sustainability strategies. This process involves multiple business areas, including operations management, regional execution, material selection, supply chain collaboration, KPIs, consumer communication and cost control. Relying only on public materials and consumer perspectives makes it difficult to fully explain how these strategies are implemented across different business areas.

Third, mainland China is an important market for international luxury groups. The local translation, implementation difficulties and value tensions of global or group-level sustainability strategies in this market still require more practice-based analysis. In particular, cost pressure, supply chain coordination, organisational coordination, consumer response, and the relationship between sustainability and traditional luxury value need to be further examined through practitioners' actual experience.

Therefore, through semi-structured interviews with relevant practitioners working in or closely related to the mainland Chinese market, this study complements existing understanding by adding practitioner-based evidence on how the sustainability strategies of international luxury groups are understood, translated and implemented in this market. It also analyses the main barriers and tensions in the implementation process.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Scope Refinement

This study adopts a qualitative research design and uses semi-structured in-depth interviews as the main data collection method. Semi-structured in-depth interviews usually revolve around a set of pre-defined open-ended questions, but do not completely restrict the participants' answers. During the interview process, the researchers can continue to ask follow-up questions based on the participants' experiences and answers, thereby obtaining a more specific and in-depth understanding of the research questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). As this study focuses on the implementation process of sustainability strategies of international luxury groups in the mainland Chinese market, semi-structured interviews can help this study start from the actual experience of practitioners to understand how these strategies enter daily business practices. This method also encourages more detailed responses beyond the pre-set questions.

This study adopted semi-structured interviews, which was also related to the exploratory nature of the research topic. The implementation of sustainability strategies of international luxury groups in the mainland Chinese market involves multiple roles and business processes, including supply chain management, material selection, store operations, employee training and consumer communication. In the early stage of the research, it was difficult to fully anticipate all key questions, so a method was needed that could flexibly adjust the questioning direction based on the participants' job experience. Through this approach, participants could explain the issues they considered important based on their own work experience, and the researcher could further inquire about new viewpoints, inconsistencies, or supplementary information during the interviews (Horton et al., 2004). This also provided a foundation for extracting key content from the interview transcripts, conducting coding and developing the thematic analysis.

This research initially focused on the Asian market and examined the sustainable strategies implemented by luxury groups in various Asian markets. However, during the research process, the limitations of using Asia as a broad research scope gradually became clearer. Different regions have differences in consumer culture, retail environment, market maturity, and business conditions. If the Asian market is still taken as the overall research scope, it may lead to a fragmented research analysis.

Therefore, this study narrows its focus to the mainland Chinese market. The mainland Chinese market is more directly connected with the first-hand interview data collected for this study and provides a more specific business context. Previous research suggests that foreign luxury fashion brands in China need to respond to local factors such as consumer preferences, cultural differences, brand perception and retail channels (Bonetti et al., 2016). In this context, focusing on the mainland Chinese market helps this study further examine how global sustainability strategies are understood in local business environments and translated into concrete practices such as supply chain management, material selection, store operations, staff training and consumer communication.

3.2 Sampling Strategy and Participants

This study employed purposive sampling, which involved selecting participants based on their relevance to the research and their accessibility. Purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative research as it enables researchers to choose participants who can provide key information according to the research objectives, and it is also applicable to the phased data collection process. Preliminary interviews can help researchers identify issues worthy of further exploration, while subsequent interviews can supplement more targeted job perspectives based on the initial findings (Rai & Thapa, 2015).

In this study, participant selection was based on two main conditions. First, participants needed to have working experience in the mainland Chinese market or in business contexts related to mainland China, so that the interview data remained consistent with the research scope. Second, participants' roles needed to be related to the practical translation and execution of sustainability strategies, such as ESG or sustainability management, headquarters or regional operations, retail store execution, procurement, material development, supply chain management, product development or consumer communication. During the staged interview process, this study also considered the complementarity of different role perspectives, so that the sample could cover key areas such as strategic understanding, local translation, implementation barriers and consumer communication.

This study finally completed fifteen semi-structured interviews. The participants covered different role perspectives, including sustainability governance, headquarters and regional operations, store-level execution, procurement, materials and supply chain. This sample structure helps the study understand the implementation of sustainability strategies in the mainland Chinese market at different business levels. Table 3.1 summarises the participants' basic information and their relevance to this study. Appendix Table A2 further shows how different role perspectives contribute to the study.

Table 3.1 Final Interview Participant Overview

Participant	**Main role perspective**	**Market or organisational context**	**Main focus in this study**
P1	Operations-related perspective	Jewellery / high-end consumer market context in China	Store operations, cost pressure, supplier coordination

Participant	Main role perspective	Market or organisational context	Main focus in this study
P2	Sustainability / ESG-related perspective	International luxury group with China-related market experience	ESG management, KPI, supplier management
P3	Regional retail management perspective	Regional retail context in the Chinese market	Regional execution, green store operation, retail KPI
P4	Brand sustainability-related perspective	International luxury brand context in China	Brand value, product development, consumer perception
P5	Materials / supply chain-related perspective	Chinese high-end womenswear and material supply chain context	Material selection, supplier collaboration, traceability
P6	Frontline sales / store execution perspective	Luxury retail store context in China	Store execution, customer response, sales pressure
P7	Sales management / frontline retail management perspective	Luxury retail management context in China	Staff training, store execution, cross-functional coordination
P8	Sustainable material procurement / material development perspective	China and Asia-related supply chain context	Material procurement, supplier audit, quality assessment
P9	Supply chain procurement management perspective	Luxury supply chain procurement context	Supplier rating, certification, traceability reports
P10	Procurement / supply chain execution perspective	Luxury procurement and supply chain execution context	Procurement standards, sustainability compliance, traceability data
P11	Retail experience / visual execution perspective	Luxury store experience context in China	Store space, display materials, premium store experience
P12	Headquarters operations planning / cross-market coordination perspective	Headquarters operations and cross-market coordination context	Product initiation, supplier screening, cross-market compliance
P13	China regional retail operations / store experience perspective	Retail operations context in mainland China	Store KPI, daily audit, green service
P14	Store management / frontline retail execution perspective	Store management context in northern China	Store implementation, consumer response, circular service

Participant	Main role perspective	Market or organisational context	Main focus in this study
P15	Group sustainability function / APAC implementation perspective	Group sustainability governance and APAC implementation context	ESG governance, assessment systems, performance weighting

Note. All participants are anonymised. The role perspectives are simplified from the interview transcripts and coding records. The sample covers sustainability governance, regional retail operations, store-level execution, procurement, materials, supply chain and consumer-facing implementation.

Participant recruitment and data collection started in early January 2026 and lasted nearly six months. The interviews were conducted in stages, with five participants in each stage. After each stage, this study organised the transcripts and reviewed the sample structure based on the research questions and initial coding results. Later participants were selected based on this review. They helped supplement role perspectives that were less represented in the previous stage.

After the fifteenth interview was completed, the core themes had become relatively stable. Later interviews mainly confirmed and supplemented the existing findings across different role perspectives. They did not suggest the need to add a new main theme. The final sample also covered the main practice-based perspectives related to the research questions. These included sustainability governance, headquarters and regional operations, store-level execution, procurement, materials and supply chain. Therefore, fifteen participants were sufficient for the qualitative depth, role coverage and scope of this capstone project.

3.3 Interview Guide and Data Collection

This study employed a semi-structured interview outline for data collection. The interview questions were designed around three research questions, focusing on how the sustainability strategies of international luxury brands or groups are understood, translated and implemented in the mainland Chinese market. Kallio et al. (2016)

emphasised that a rigorous semi-structured interview outline can enhance the credibility of qualitative research, as it can make the data collection process more structured and ensure that the interview questions more clearly serve the research purpose. Therefore, this study divided the interview content design into four core modules, enabling different participants to discuss around the same topic while also maintaining the space for follow-up questions based on job experience.

The interview guide was designed based on the research aim and the three research questions. It was organised into four modules. The four modules focused on participants' understanding of sustainability strategies, how these strategies entered business practices, consumer responses and luxury-sustainability tensions, and future challenges and further reflections. This structure helped keep the fifteen interviews consistent. It also provided a framework for the initial organisation of the interview transcripts. The detailed interview questions are provided in Appendix Table A1. Table 3.2 summarises the four interview modules, their main purposes and their related research questions.

Table 3.2 Interview Module–RQ Mapping

Interview Module	**Main Purpose**	**Related RQ**
Module 1: Sustainability understanding and drivers	To understand how participants interpret sustainability strategies and what drives companies to promote them.	RQ1
Module 2: Implementation process and barriers	To examine how sustainability strategies are translated into business practices and what difficulties appear during implementation.	RQ2 / RQ3
Module 3: Market response and luxury-sustainability tensions	To explore consumer responses and the relationship between sustainability and traditional luxury values.	RQ3

Interview Module	Main Purpose	Related RQ
Module 4: Future challenges and further reflections	To identify future challenges and additional reflections from participants.	RQ3

All fifteen interviews followed the four-module interview guide. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. Before each interview started, the research purpose, use of interview data and anonymisation approach were explained to the participants. The interviews started only after participants' consent was obtained. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher first asked for basic demographic information, including the participant's role background, relevant work experience, and their connection with the mainland Chinese market or mainland China-related business contexts. After that, the interview followed the four modules. The same general structure was used across all interviews. However, the wording and order of some questions were adjusted according to participants' role experience. This helped keep the data collection process comparable. It also allowed participants to give more specific explanations based on their own work experience. The interview data were then prepared for transcription, anonymisation, coding and thematic analysis, as explained in Section 3.4.

3.4 Data Organisation and Thematic Analysis

All fifteen interviews were conducted in Chinese, as this was the most suitable language for most participants to describe their work experience. Using Chinese allowed participants to express their workplace observations and judgements more naturally. After each interview, the interview materials were organised and transcribed into Chinese, and labelled as P1–P15. To protect participants' identities, all transcripts were anonymised. Real names, specific company or brand names, exact job titles, identifiable personal information and sensitive business information were removed or replaced. The anonymised Chinese transcripts preserved the participants' original expressions and main meanings and served as the main data for analysis. The final selected quotations were translated into English for presentation in the findings and appendix.

Data organisation first followed the four interview modules. Each transcript was organised under four sections: sustainability strategy understanding and drivers, implementation process and practical barriers, market response and luxury-sustainability tensions, and future challenges and further reflections. This structure remained consistent with the interview guide and allowed responses from different participants to be compared under the same framework.

After organising the data by module, this study extracted key content directly related to the research questions from each transcript. This included participants' understanding of sustainability strategies, actual implementation practices, implementation difficulties, consumer response, luxury-value tensions and future challenges. During this process, the study retained participants' core views and removed repeated expressions, irrelevant conversations and transcript content that did not directly affect the analysis.

After organising the interview transcripts and extracting the key content, this study adopted thematic analysis to further analyse the data. Clarke and Braun (2017) pointed out that thematic analysis is flexible and suitable for identifying the meaning patterns within a single piece of data and among different data, as well as analysing the experiences, viewpoints, and practices of the respondents.

In this study, the thematic analysis developed gradually across the three stages of interviews. After the P1–P5 interviews were completed, this study extracted key content related to the research questions based on the four interview modules, and developed initial codes and preliminary theme directions. After the P6–P10 interviews were completed, the new data were placed into the same analytical framework and compared with the earlier codes. This stage helped supplement perspectives on store execution, procurement, materials and supply chain. After the P11–P15 interviews were completed, this study further checked whether the codes and themes had become stable. It also merged codes that were repetitive, overlapping or unclear.

During this process, the codebook was continuously updated. Related codes were grouped into higher-level analytical categories and developed into six final themes through cross-interview comparison of P1–P15. These themes were used to answer the three research questions. The final codebook is presented in Appendix Table A3.

Representative quotations were also marked during the coding process. After the final themes were confirmed, this study selected the quotations most relevant to each theme, and lightly cleaned and translated them into English. The cleaning process mainly removed fillers, repetitions and less relevant parts, while preserving the participants' original meaning and core expressions. The selected interview quotations are presented in Appendix Table A4.

3.5 Ethics

This study followed basic ethical principles during the interview process. All participants took part voluntarily. Before each interview, they were informed of the research purpose, the use of interview data and the anonymisation approach. Participants could choose not to answer questions they felt uncomfortable with. They could also stop participating at any time during the interview.

To protect participants' identities, all interview materials were anonymised. Real names, specific company or brand names and exact job titles were removed or replaced. Identifiable personal information and sensitive business information were also removed or replaced. The interview data were used only for the analysis of this capstone project and not for any commercial or public purpose. Quotations presented in the findings chapter and appendix were also anonymised. This helped avoid identifying specific participants or their organisations.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

4.1 Coding-to-theme Overview

This study developed six final themes through coding and cross-interview comparison of the fifteen interviews. Table 4.1 shows the development process from initial codes and analytical categories to final themes. It also explains how each theme relates to the research questions.

Theme 1 responds to RQ1 and focuses on how participants understood sustainability strategies. Theme 2 responds to RQ2 and focuses on how sustainability strategies were translated into local business practices. Themes 3 to 6 respond to RQ3 and show the main issues in the implementation process, including cost, supply chain, organisational coordination, consumer response, luxury value tensions and system integration.

These themes provide the analytical basis for the findings chapter. They help explain how sustainability strategies in the mainland Chinese market are understood, translated and shaped by practical implementation barriers.

Table 4.1 Coding-to-Theme Development

Selected initial coding examples	Analytical category	Final cross-interview theme	Related RQ
Long-term strategy statements; brand responsibility; external regulatory pressure; industry standard influence; ESG and assessment mechanisms	Strategic understanding and drivers	Theme 1: Sustainability as a long-term strategic direction shaped by internal values and external pressures	RQ1
Supplier entry requirements; material environmental assessment; green store practices; packaging adjustment; store KPI records; customer-facing green service	Strategy-to-practice translation	Theme 2: Translation of sustainability strategy into local business practices	RQ2

Selected initial coding examples	Analytical category	Final cross-interview theme	Related RQ
Cost increase; certification capability gaps; fragmented supply chain data; inconsistent departmental targets; insufficient staff training; regional and store condition differences	Implementation barriers	Theme 3: Implementation barriers: cost, supply chain, coordination and capability constraints	RQ2 / RQ3
Sustainability as a non-priority in purchase decisions; price and style priority; quality and texture priority; gift packaging preference; customer explanation burden	Consumer response and purchase priorities	Theme 4: Consumer attitude–behaviour gap in sustainable luxury consumption	RQ3
Eco-packaging premium-feel concern; recycled material low-value reading; repair service quality concern; luxury quality threshold; craftsmanship and material innovation	Luxury–sustainability value tension	Theme 5: Luxury and sustainability create value tensions, and brands need to redefine sustainable luxury through quality, technology and material innovation	RQ3
One-off green activities; circular service implementation gap; end-to-end traceability gap; carbon footprint data gap; regional execution variation; sustainability business value conversion	System integration and sustainable business value	Theme 6: From fragmented initiatives to integrated systems and sustainable business value	RQ3

4.2 Strategic Understanding: Long-term Direction, Internal Values and External Pressures

The interview data show that participants generally understood sustainability as a long-term strategic direction for international luxury groups. Participants in sustainability governance, ESG, headquarters operations and brand management roles often linked sustainability with brand responsibility, long-term vision, compliance requirements and industry leadership.

From the perspective of driving factors, participants indicated that sustainability strategies are shaped by both external pressure and internal values. External factors include regulatory requirements, industry standards, market trends and compliance pressure. These factors set the baseline that companies must meet. Internal factors include original brand values, long-term development vision and corporate responsibility. These factors influence whether companies are willing to make real investment and continue promoting sustainability. P15 explained this relationship between external and internal factors clearly: "*External pressure is the baseline requirement, while internal value is an aspiration. The two support each other, allowing our sustainability practices to be implemented in compliance with requirements and to show industry leadership*."

This understanding was also reflected in the interviews for positions related to ESG and sustainable management. P2 mentioned that the previous company positioned sustainability as a long-term strategic direction: "*It was not about following a trend, completing a task, responding to an emergency, or dealing with the requirements of a specific department. It was a relatively long-term direction*." This indicates that at the group level, sustainability is often institutionalised through strategic goals, assessment systems and governance mechanisms, and gradually incorporates into long-term management arrangements.

However, understandings of sustainability strategies were not the same across different roles. Participants at headquarters, ESG and brand levels placed more emphasis on long-term value and governance logic. Frontline and local execution roles in mainland China tended to understand sustainability through phased tasks, compliance requirements and specific work arrangements. P11 summarised this difference: "*In summary, headquarters certainly sees it as a long-term value strategy, while the frontline in China sees it more as a phased compliance task. The difference* *between these two levels is quite clear.*" This shows that when sustainability strategies enter the local market from the group level, they need to be understood and translated through different roles and execution contexts.

In general, Theme 1 responds to RQ1. In the mainland Chinese market, the sustainability strategies of international luxury groups are mainly understood as a long-term strategic direction. They are shaped by both external institutional pressure and internal brand values. Differences across roles also provide a basis for later local translation and implementation issues.

4.3 Translation into Local Practices and Implementation Barriers

The interview data show that sustainability strategies have already entered concrete business processes in the mainland Chinese market. These practices include material selection, supplier screening, environmental qualification review, labour standards, store materials, energy management, green services and operational assessment. P12 mentioned that sustainability had influenced product and supply chain decisions at the level of headquarters operations and cross-market coordination: "*In daily work, we can genuinely feel its practical influence. It does not just stay at the level of a slogan. [...] the company gives priority to assessing environmentally friendly materials and even considers recyclability.*"

At the store and regional operation levels, sustainability is translated into more specific daily execution indicators. P13's work involved reviewing energy consumption data, waste sorting, disposable items and green service audits: "*Every day, I review each store's energy consumption data, waste-sorting compliance rate, use of disposable items, and the implementation of green services*." These indicators are also directly related to store management and performance. P13 further mentioned: "*This score is directly linked to store ratings, team performance and annual awards*." These indicators show that sustainability has entered daily store management and assessment systems. It has also begun to influence execution evaluation at regional and store levels.

However, in actual landing process, sustainability practices are affected by sales pressure. This issue became more visible in store-level execution. When eco-friendly products had slow sales, stores tended to display and recommend classic products that were easier to sell. P6 mentioned: "*The eco-friendly series was moved to the corner of the display cabinet and was not actively recommended unless customers asked about it*." This indicates that sustainable products may enter promotion plans. However, under performance pressure, their execution priority may be reduced.

Cross-departmental collaboration is also a major obstacle in implementation. Sustainability projects usually require cooperation across product, marketing, supply chain, procurement and frontline store teams. However, different departments may have different KPIs and work priorities. P7 points out: "*Short-term KPI may not include sustainability-related indicators. This can easily lead to a situation where the leading department cannot push the project forward and supporting departments lack motivation.*" Therefore, sustainability implementation requires common goals, clear responsibilities and continuous collaboration among all departments.

Theme 2 mainly responds to RQ2 and also links to RQ3. Theme 3 further explains the barriers in this process. Sustainability strategies have been translated into concrete practices in the mainland Chinese market. These practices are influenced by store sales targets, short-term KPI, cross-departmental coordination and supply chain cooperation. Stable implementation requires sustainability to be embedded in local operations, performance assessment and cross-departmental collaboration.

4.4 Consumer Response and Luxury-sustainability Value Tensions

The interview data show a gap between consumers' attitudes towards sustainability and their actual purchasing behaviour. Some consumers recognise the idea of environmental protection. However, when buying luxury goods, they still place product fit and personal needs first. P4 explained: "*However, when consumers choose a product, they mainly consider whether the product meets their own needs. This may be the more important factor. After their needs are met, some consumers may then consider sustainability factors.*" This shows that sustainability is usually not the first criterion in luxury purchasing decisions.

This purchasing priority is more visible in store sales and gift-giving contexts. P6 observed that consumers may express support for environmental protection. In actual purchases, they still prefer traditional classic styles: "*But when they actually place an order, they still choose traditional classic styles*." In the context of gift-giving, packaging and social image also shape the choice: "*customers may say they support environmental protection, but when choosing gifts, they still choose styles with luxurious packaging that look more respectable.*" P7 added: "*The core needs are always style or price, while sustainability can only be seen as an added benefit*." Thus, in consumer decision-making, sustainability is more often seen as an added value. It is not usually a core purchase driver.

When sustainability is linked to specific product features, consumer acceptance is further shaped by premium feel and perceived value. P14 explained that some consumers may respond negatively when they hear that a product uses recyclable or recycled materials: "*They may even decide not to consider the product, because once they hear that it is recyclable, they feel it is a bit cheap or lowers the product's value*." This suggests that sustainable materials may reduce product appeal if consumers associate them with lower value or cheaper quality.

This consumer perception also reflects a deeper tension between luxury and sustainable values. Luxury goods emphasise uniqueness, scarcity and high quality. Sustainability emphasises recycling, reduced consumption and resource reuse. P1 used high jewellery as an example: "*The core of luxury goods is uniqueness and scarcity. For example, in high jewellery, we use rare materials such as diamonds and gemstones, and these materials themselves are non-renewable*." In some product categories, sustainability can therefore come into tension with the material value and scarcity logic of luxury goods.

Material quality also limits the implementation of sustainable practices. P8 gave the example of recycled wool fabric. Most of its indicators were close to those of traditional wool, but it was not adopted because its pilling performance was slightly weaker: "*Because of this single issue, the design team eventually refused to use it.*" P8 further stressed: "*quality is a relatively absolute red line, and sustainability cannot cross that line.*" This suggests that sustainable materials can be adopted in luxury products only if they maintain quality, texture and durability.

Overall, Theme 4 and Theme 5 jointly address RQ3. Consumers do not completely reject sustainability, but its priority in purchasing decisions remains relatively low. At the same time, the scarcity, quality standards, and high-end appeal of luxury goods also limit the acceptance of recycled materials, recycling, and environmental communication. Therefore, the implementation of sustainable luxury is influenced by both consumer choice logic and luxury value logic.

4.5 Full-chain Coordination, Implementation Gaps and Data Transparency

The interview data show that insufficient full-chain coordination is an important issue in current sustainability practices. Participants believed that many brands have already taken actions in product innovation, operational carbon reduction and green services. But the implementation gaps is still existing between these actions. P3 stated: "*At present, most brands' sustainability practices are still concentrated on front-end product innovation and back-end operational carbon reduction, while supply chain coordination remains insufficient*." This suggests that, if sustainability practices remain concentrated in only some parts of the business, they cannot form a complete implementation system.

This implementation difficulty is more visible in the green transformation of high-end products. P15 described this challenge in relation to high-end products and consumer-end circular systems: "*one typical project that sounds beautiful in theory but is very difficult in practice is the full green transformation of high-end products and the building of a consumer-end circular system*." This suggests that full-chain coordination involves supply chains and operations. It also requires a balance between materials, quality, craftsmanship and consumer-end circular systems.

Participants also noted that sustainability practices need to move beyond surface-level labels. They need to become more genuine and verifiable in implementation. P10 stated: "*In the future, if brands only make superficial efforts or practice surface-level environmental protection, it will become even harder for them to stand.*" P10 further emphasised that sustainability needs to be implemented across "*raw materials, production, logistics, terminals and recycling*". Data transparency is also needed to strengthen consumer trust. Together, these points show that full-chain transparency and genuine execution have become important criteria for participants when judging the effectiveness of sustainability practices.

Overall, Theme 6 addresses RQ3. Participants believed that the challenges of sustainability implementation have extended to the full-chain level. These challenges are mainly reflected in insufficient coordination, implementation gaps, closed-loop recycling, genuine execution, data transparency, and the practical difficulty of green transformation in high-end products.

4.6 Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings in this chapter address the three research questions of this study.

For RQ1, participants generally understood sustainability as a long-term strategic direction for international luxury groups. However, participants in different roles understood sustainability in different ways. Headquarters, ESG and brand-related roles placed more emphasis on long-term value, governance and industry responsibility. Frontline and local execution roles more often understood sustainability through compliance tasks and specific work requirements.

For RQ2, the interview data show that sustainability strategies have entered concrete business practices in the mainland Chinese market. These practices include product material selection, supplier screening, store operations, green services, KPI and performance assessment. Sustainability has become part of local operations and daily execution.

For RQ3, the implementation process is shaped by multiple factors. The main issues include sales pressure, short-term KPI, cross-functional coordination, consumer purchase priorities, luxury-sustainability value tensions, insufficient full-chain coordination and data transparency.

These findings show that the implementation of sustainability strategies in the mainland Chinese market is a continuous process from strategic understanding to local translation, actual execution and value coordination.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Overall Interpretation of the Research Problem

This study examines how the sustainability strategies of international luxury groups are understood, translated and implemented in the mainland Chinese market. Previous studies have shown that sustainability in the luxury industry has gradually become a long-term and systematic value-chain practice (Campos Franco et al., 2019). At the same time, the sustainability reports of luxury groups may still show selective disclosure and insufficient implementation (Wells et al., 2021). Corporate commitments and public reports are not enough to explain this process. They do not show how sustainability strategies enter daily business practices in the mainland Chinese market.

The findings of this study first respond to RQ1 and RQ2. Participants generally understood sustainability as part of a long-term direction, corporate responsibility, a compliance requirement and brand value. At the same time, sustainability has entered specific work processes in the mainland Chinese market, including materials, supply chains, store operations and consumer communication. Different roles and business processes therefore support the local translation of sustainability strategies.

The findings also respond to RQ3. After sustainability strategies enter local practices, they are shaped by real business conditions. Sales pressure, short-term KPI, cross-functional coordination, supply chain capability, material quality requirements and differences in store-level execution all affect implementation outcomes. Consumers' judgements about price, style, quality, packaging and brand experience also influence their acceptance of sustainability value. Successful implementation in the mainland Chinese market depends on support from local operations, supply chains, store-level execution and consumer communication.

5.2 Local Translation of Sustainability Strategies

This study shows that the implementation of sustainability strategies in the mainland Chinese market depends on local translation. Baumgartner (2014) argues that strategic integration at the group level can provide an overall direction for sustainability. The findings support this point. Headquarters, ESG and brand sustainability-related roles more often understood sustainability through long-term direction, governance responsibility, compliance requirements and brand value. Group-level strategy therefore shapes the basic understanding of sustainability within the organisation.

At the same time, sustainability strategies are translated into specific tasks after they enter the mainland Chinese market. Headquarters and ESG-related roles focus more on target setting, compliance requirements, assessment mechanisms and cross-market coordination. Procurement and supply chain roles focus more on material standards, supplier screening, certification requirements and traceability documents. Regional operations and store management roles focus more on KPI, daily audits, green services and staff execution. Frontline sales roles focus more on how to explain sustainable products to consumers. They also need to balance sales targets and green promotion. This shows that the understanding and execution of sustainability strategies change across roles and work contexts.

These role differences also show the importance of local translation. Azapagic (2003b) argues that companies need to embed sustainability issues into corporate planning and processes through structured management systems. In the mainland Chinese market, such embedding needs to enter more specific business processes. These include material selection, procurement decisions, supplier screening, regional operations, store management and consumer communication. Sustainability goals can only influence local execution when they enter these processes.

The mainland Chinese market also shapes the form of local translation. Bonetti et al. (2016) point out that foreign luxury fashion brands in China need to respond to local factors such as consumer preferences, cultural differences, brand awareness and retail channels. The findings support this view. Local factors also influence the implementation of sustainability strategies. Sustainability communication needs to fit consumers' judgements about quality, packaging, brand experience and premium feel. Store-level execution also needs to balance green services and sales targets.

The implementation of sustainability strategies in the mainland Chinese market needs to move from group-level goals into local processes. These strategies need to be translated by different roles into executable tasks. They also need to enter practical work such as material selection, supplier management, store-level execution and consumer communication. This process is key to moving sustainability strategies from organisational understanding to local execution.

5.3 Implementation Barriers and Value Tensions

The implementation of sustainability strategies in the mainland Chinese market is shaped by two groups of factors. The first group concerns operational constraints, including cost, short-term KPIs, sales pressure, cross-functional coordination, supplier capability, certification and traceability. The second group concerns value tensions, which includes consumer purchase priorities, premium feel, quality standards, scarcity and brand experience. Operational constraints affect practical execution. Value tensions affect consumer acceptance of sustainability in luxury consumption.

At the operational level, this study supports the argument of Epstein and Buhovac (2010). Companies need to balance social, environmental and economic goals when promoting sustainability. They may also face pressure from short-term performance. In this study, such pressure mainly appears through sales targets, cost control and KPI assessment. Even when sustainability projects have entered local business practices, their priority may be reduced under short-term performance pressure.

Organisational coordination further affects implementation outcomes. Hahn et al. (2015) point out that sustainability practices involve tensions between economic, environmental and social goals. The findings further show that these tensions also appear in departmental collaboration. When departmental KPIs are not aligned, project progress can be affected. Sustainability projects require joint support from product, procurement, supply chain, marketing, regional operations and stores. Without clear responsibilities and assessment standards, projects may remain in separate parts of the business. Continuous execution is then difficult to achieve.

Supply chain and material issues also limit sustainability implementation. Bhandari et al. (2022) identify barriers to sustainable sourcing, including management support, raw material supply, financial pressure, supplier cooperation, certification requirements and consumer perceptions. This study supports these points and adds more detail from the luxury context. Sustainable materials not only need to meet environmental requirements, but also need to meet standards for quality, texture, durability and brand fit. Heil and Langer (2017) also point out that luxury production and supply chains are more complex because of craft-oriented production and rare materials. The findings further show that this complexity directly affects material substitution, supplier selection, certification, traceability and full-chain transparency.

Operational constraints mainly affect whether sustainability goals can be executed. The second type of influence comes from value tensions. Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2017) point out that, in luxury consumption, sustainability issues such as production methods and supply chains are usually not the main considerations in purchase decisions. This study supports this point. Consumers may recognise the idea of environmental protection, but they still place style, price, quality, packaging, brand experience and social image in gift-giving contexts first. As a result, sustainability value is more likely to become an added factor in store sales.

Consumer responses also show that sustainability in luxury needs to be connected with product value. Zhao et al. (2023) point out that the influence of sustainable luxury on purchase intention is context-dependent. It is also shaped by perceived quality, functionality, brand consistency and market context. The findings further show that product appeal may be weakened if recycled materials, circular services or environmentally friendly packaging are understood as reducing quality or premium feeling. Sustainability value therefore needs to be connected with quality, craftsmanship, durability and brand experience.

These findings show two main challenges in sustainability implementation in the mainland Chinese luxury market. The first is operational execution. The second is luxury value tension. Sustainability goals are more likely to be sustained when they enter concrete business processes and connect with quality, brand experience and consumer communication.

5.4 Practical Implications for Sustainability Practice

This study has practical implications for how international luxury groups promote sustainability practices in the mainland Chinese market. First, sustainability strategies need to move from group-level goals into local management systems. For brands, sustainability goals need to be translated into local KPIs, departmental responsibilities, execution standards and staff training. In this way, sustainability can more easily become part of daily business. It is less likely to remain in strategy documents, public reports or brand communication.

Second, supply chain and cross-functional coordination are the foundation of sustainability implementation. International luxury groups need to strengthen supplier screening, certification review, material traceability and data transparency. Sustainability projects usually involve procurement, supply chain, product, marketing, regional operations and store teams. If different departments have inconsistent goals and assessment standards, sustainability projects may be weakened during execution. Brands need clearer responsibilities and coordination mechanisms. This can help material standards, supplier management, product development and market execution work together.

Third, regional operations and store-level execution are key points where sustainability strategies reach consumers. Frontline retail staff interact directly with consumers. Their understanding of sustainable products, materials and brand responsibility affects whether consumers can truly understand sustainability value. Brands need to strengthen store staff training, including product knowledge, material explanation, green service procedures and consumer communication methods. Store assessment also needs to be more balanced. Sales targets remain important. Sustainable product display, green service execution and the quality of customer communication should also be included in store management. This can reduce the pressure that short-term sales goals place on sustainability tasks.

Finally, consumer communication needs to connect sustainability value with luxury value. Mainland Chinese luxury consumers still value style, quality, packaging, brand experience and social image in gift-giving contexts. Sustainability communication needs to go beyond environmental concepts. It also needs to explain how sustainability supports product quality, craftsmanship, durability and long-term brand value. For international luxury groups, sustainability strategies are more likely to become genuine, continuous and understandable practices in the mainland Chinese market when supply chains, products, store-level execution and consumer communication work together.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

6.1 Research Summary

This study examined how the sustainability strategies of international luxury groups are understood, translated and implemented in the mainland Chinese market. Based on semi-structured interviews with 15 relevant practitioners, this study examined group-level sustainability goals through specific roles and business processes. It analysed how these goals are understood, carried out and adjusted by local teams in the mainland Chinese market.

The main finding of this study is that the implementation challenges of sustainability strategies in the mainland Chinese market are mainly centred in translation, coordination and continuous execution. First, management and brand-level teams need to translate group-level sustainability goals into local management mechanisms. These include departmental responsibilities, KPI setting, execution standards and training arrangements. If these mechanisms are unclear, sustainability may remain as a strategic slogan or a short-term task. Future research could compare the implementation of sustainability strategies in China, Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asian markets.

Second, procurement and supply chain processes need to provide basic support for sustainability practices. This includes material standards, supplier screening, certification review, traceability documents and data transparency. Sustainable materials also need to meet environmental requirements, quality requirements, cost control needs and the texture standards of luxury goods.

Finally, regional operations and stores are the frontline level of execution. Under sales assessment pressure, stores need to strengthen staff understanding of sustainable products, green services and brand responsibility. This helps frontline staff explain sustainability value to consumers more clearly during sales communication. In summary, sustainability strategies need to enter management mechanisms, supply chain systems and store-level execution at the same time. Only then can they become continuous, genuine and visible practices in the mainland Chinese market.

6.2 Research Contributions

The first contribution of this study is to shift attention to the local implementation process of sustainability strategies in international luxury groups. Existing studies have often focused on corporate commitments, sustainability disclosure, or how consumers perceive sustainable luxury. This study focuses on what happens after these goals enter the mainland Chinese market. It examines how they are understood, translated and carried out by different roles. In this way, the study addresses the limited discussion of strategy-to-practice translation in the existing literature.

The second contribution is that this study provides practice-based evidence from practitioners. Compared with studies that rely mainly on public reports or consumer attitude data, this study draws on the practical experience of practitioners in different roles. It shows role differences, business pressures, coordination problems and execution gaps in sustainability implementation. This evidence helps explain the sustainability implementation process in the mainland Chinese luxury market in a more concrete way.

The third contribution is that this study offers practical reference for real-world sustainability practice. Mainland China remains an important market for international luxury groups to understand local consumers, adjust retail practices and develop long-term brand value. In this context, sustainability should not remain only in brand communication or report content. It needs to enter local management, business coordination, execution standards and consumer communication. This study can help brands identify weak points in sustainability practices in the mainland Chinese market. It can also help reduce surface-level implementation and support more genuine and stable local practices that consumers can recognise.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study still has several limitations. First, it is based on semi-structured interviews with 15 participants. The participants covered different roles, including sustainability governance, regional operations, store-level execution, procurement, materials and supply chains. This provides useful qualitative depth and role-based perspectives. The sample helps explain how sustainability strategies are implemented in practice in the mainland Chinese market. However, the sample size is limited. Most participants also had practice-based experience related to the mainland Chinese market. For this reason, the findings cannot represent the whole luxury industry. They also cannot be directly generalised to all international luxury groups.

Second, this study focuses on the mainland Chinese market. This scope helps keep the research object, participant experience and market context consistent. However, Asian markets vary in consumption culture, retail environments, regulatory conditions and business models. Because of these differences, the findings should not be directly generalised to other Asian markets. Future research could compare the implementation of sustainability strategies in mainland China, Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asian markets.

Third, for ethical and anonymisation reasons, this study did not make direct comparisons between specific brands or groups. This helps protect participants' identities and business information. It also limits the analysis of differences between brands, groups and luxury product categories. Future research could focus on a specific brand, group or product category, such as jewellery, leather goods, high-end ready-to-wear or beauty, with fuller data and research permission. This could support a deeper analysis of differences in sustainability practices.

Finally, this study is mainly based on practitioner interviews. It focuses on practitioners' understanding and experience of sustainability strategy implementation.

It does not directly measure consumers' actual purchase behaviour. It also does not assess corporate sustainability performance data. Future research could include consumer interviews, surveys or a mixed-methods design. This would combine practitioner perspectives with consumer data. It could provide a fuller understanding of how sustainability value is executed by companies, communicated by employees and accepted by consumers.

Appendix

1.Appendix Table A1-Interview Guide

Interview Questions

- Basic Information（Demographics）

· Your current role and department

· The luxury group or brand you work for

· Years of work experience in the luxury industry

· Main market(s) you are involved in (e.g. China / Asia / Global)

1.An overall understanding of the company's sustainable strategy

-How would you describe how your company views sustainability today? More as a long-term direction or a short-term task?

-In your day-to-day work, do sustainability goals actually influence decisions?

2. The main reasons for promoting sustainable practices

-What do you think are the main reasons your company pushes sustainability initiatives?

-Compared to internal values or strategy, how important are external factors such as regulation or industry trends?

3. Obstacles in the implementation process

-What practical difficulties have you encountered when implementing sustainability initiatives?

-In which areas does sustainability look clear on paper but become difficult in practice?

4. Market and Consumer Response

-From your observation, do luxury consumers genuinely care about sustainability?

-Have you noticed cases where consumers express support for sustainability but do not prioritize it when purchasing?

5. The Tension Between Luxury and Sustainability

-In your view, can sustainability conflict with traditional ideas of luxury?

-Is there concern that sustainability might affect quality, exclusivity, or brand image?

6. Common practices within the industry

-Do you feel that sustainability has become something all luxury brands are expected to do?

-Do industry standards or what competitors do influence your company's decisions?

7. Review and Future

-What do you think will be the biggest sustainability challenge for luxury companies in the coming years?

-Is there anything you feel outsiders or academic research often misunderstand?

2.Appendix Table A2-Role and Insight Matrix

Role perspective group	**Participants**	**Main insight**	**Related RQ**
Sustainability governance, brand sustainability and headquarters operations planning perspectives	P2, P4, P12, P15	Shows how sustainability is understood as a long-term strategic direction and embedded into ESG, KPI, assessment systems, supplier standards, brand value management, headquarters operations planning and cross-market coordination.	RQ1 / RQ2
Regional operations and retail management perspectives	P1, P3, P13	Shows how sustainability is translated into regional execution, store operations, green store practices, retail KPI, daily audits and service processes in the Chinese market.	RQ2 / RQ3
Store-level and frontline retail execution perspectives	P6, P7, P11, P14	Shows how sustainability is implemented through store sales, packaging, display, staff training, customer communication and circular services, while being shaped by sales pressure, consumer response, material perception and regional differences.	RQ2 / RQ3
Procurement, materials and supply chain perspectives	P5, P8, P9, P10	Shows how sustainability enters supply chain execution through material selection, supplier collaboration, supplier audits, certification, procurement standards, traceability reports and the balance between quality and cost.	RQ2 / RQ3

3.Appendix Table A3-Final Codebook

Theme	Theme focus	Final selected codes	Main supporting participants
Theme 1: Sustainability as a long-term strategic direction shaped by internal values and external pressures	Sustainability is understood as a long-term strategy shaped by both internal values and external pressures.	long-term strategic direction; internal value drivers; external pressure and compliance baseline; sustainability governance internalisation	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P12, P15
Theme 2: Translation of sustainability strategy into local business practices	Sustainability strategies are translated into concrete business practices through operations, products, stores, supply chains and material decisions.	local practice translation; KPI and assessment systems; material selection and supplier screening; store operations and green service	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P15
Theme 3: Implementation barriers: cost, supply chain, coordination and capability constraints	Implementation barriers are concentrated in cost, supply chain, organisational coordination, staff capability and regional execution differences.	cost pressure; supplier capability and certification constraints; traceability and data difficulty; cross-functional and cross-brand coordination difficulty; staff training and execution differences; regional and store-level differences	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15
Theme 4: Consumer attitude–behaviour gap in sustainable luxury consumption	Consumers may recognise sustainability in principle, but purchase decisions still prioritise product, price, quality and brand experience.	sustainability as a non-primary purchase factor; price, design and quality priority; gift-giving and social presentation needs; consumer perception transformation difficulty	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P14
Theme 5: Luxury and sustainability create value tensions, and brands need to redefine sustainable luxury through quality, technology and material innovation	Sustainability may create tensions with traditional luxury value, but it can also be redefined through quality, craftsmanship, technology and material innovation.	premium value and sustainability tension; perceived downgrade of sustainable materials; value redefinition through quality, craftsmanship and material innovation; high-end sustainability	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P8, P11, P14, P15

Theme	Theme focus	Final selected codes	Main supporting participants
Theme 6: From fragmented initiatives to integrated systems and sustainable business value	Future challenges involve transforming fragmented initiatives into a systematic, long-term and commercially meaningful sustainability system.	integrated implementation systems; consumer-facing circular system difficulty; full-chain transparency and long-term traceability; avoiding formalism; sustainability as business value	P1, P2, P5, P7, P8, P9, P10, P12, P13, P14, P15

4.Appendix Table A4-Selected Interview Quotations

Quote No.	Participant	Related Theme	English Translation
Q1	P15	Theme 1	External factors determine that we must do it, while the brand's original values and long-term development vision determine that we are willing to make it take root and do it with care. So neither side is more important. It is better to combine internal and external forces. External pressure is the baseline requirement, while internal value is an aspiration. The two support each other, allowing our sustainability practices to be implemented in compliance with requirements and to show industry leadership.
Q2	P2	Theme 1	I think my previous company clearly positioned sustainability as a long-term strategic direction. It was not about following a trend, completing a task, responding to an emergency, or dealing with the requirements of a specific department. It was a relatively long-term direction. This can be seen from the group's top-level design. The group launched its sustainability strategy in 2012 and upgraded it into sustainability targets in 2020. By 2035, many indicators, including carbon reduction, biodiversity and supply chain fairness, had been included in the core assessment system.
Q3	P11	Theme 1 / Theme 2	In summary, headquarters certainly sees it as a long-term value strategy, while the frontline in China sees it more as a phased compliance task. The difference between these two levels is quite clear.
Q4	P12	Theme 2	In daily work, we can genuinely feel its practical influence. It does not just stay at the level of a slogan. For example, when selecting materials for products, the company gives priority to assessing environmentally friendly materials and even considers recyclability. These factors all need to be considered. In the supply chain, when selecting partners, the company also reviews their environmental qualifications. There are now also requirements related to labour standards. Since the brand faces the European market, these aspects are sometimes assessed.
Q5	P13	Theme 2 / Theme 3	Every day, I review each store's energy consumption data, waste-sorting compliance rate, use of disposable items, and the implementation of green services. Each week, I calculate the sustainability operations assessment score. This score is directly linked to store ratings, team performance and annual awards. For daily store material procurement, event prop production and the printing of promotional materials, we must choose environmentally friendly and recyclable materials, strictly control the quantity of materials, and avoid excessive printing and material waste. All decisions need to

Quote No.	Participant	Related Theme	English Translation
			pass sustainability compliance review. In building the consumer store experience, sustainability has already become a core part of the experience.
Q6	P6	Theme 3	For example, in the third quarter of last year, we were under very heavy sales pressure. Headquarters asked us to mainly promote a recycled nylon tote bag and a small organic-cotton patchwork backpack. Both belonged to the eco-friendly series, and their profit was similar to regular items, but customer acceptance was not that high and the sales cycle was quite long. During that period, the manager directly adjusted the strategy and asked us to prioritise classic cowhide chain bags and leather crossbody bags, because these were the best-selling and fastest-moving items in the store. The eco-friendly series was moved to the corner of the display cabinet and was not actively recommended unless customers asked about it. Another time, headquarters sent several recycled canvas travel bags as key eco-friendly promotional products. Since we had to reach a phased sales target that month, we were asked to reduce their display temporarily and restore it in the next quarter. So in this kind of situation, the most typical issue is that the eco-friendly series takes a long time to show sales results, and when there is performance pressure, it gets pushed back.
Q7	P7	Theme 3	In our daily work, one of the most common problems is that sustainability projects often require cooperation across multiple departments, including product, sometimes product-line adjustment, marketing, environmental promotion, marketing strategies, supply, recycled material procurement, and frontline execution. ... Whether it is the marketing department, the supply department or our frontline department, each department has its own KPI assessment. ... Short-term KPI may not include sustainability-related indicators. This can easily lead to a situation where the leading department cannot push the project forward and supporting departments lack motivation. For example, when promoting recycled gold products, the supply chain needs to prioritise the supply of recycled-gold products, but its assessment focus may still be cost and delivery efficiency. Because each department is assessed on different points, their work priorities are different, and traditional product lines may easily receive priority. ... If there is no dedicated cross-departmental coordination mechanism, departments often manage their own work and move forward separately. This can easily create a disconnect between marketing communication and product implementation.

Quote No.	Participant	Related Theme	English Translation
Q8	P4	Theme 4	From the consumer perspective, their concern about sustainability may come more from their attention to the wider environment and society. This may gradually influence them to recognise environmental issues. However, when consumers choose a product, they mainly consider whether the product meets their own needs. This may be the more important factor. After their needs are met, some consumers may then consider sustainability factors. ... As a brand, we need to move ahead of consumers and pay more attention to these sustainability needs. We need to balance sustainability with users' actual needs and combine the two better.
Q9	P6	Theme 4	Sometimes, for bags made with eco-friendly materials, we promote them heavily, and customers nod and say they are good. But when they actually place an order, they still choose traditional classic styles. In their eyes, eco-friendly products are not grand enough and do not feel upscale enough. Classic styles are what symbolise luxury. As you just said, customers may say they support environmental protection, but when choosing gifts, they still choose styles with luxurious packaging that look more respectable. Their support is more verbal. What truly influences purchase decisions is still style, brand and price.
Q10	P7	Theme 4	I also think there is a kind of priority mismatch. The core needs are always style or price, while sustainability can only be seen as an added benefit. Many consumers think in layers. When they buy luxury goods, their core concerns are always the style, the brand and value for money. As for sustainability, it can only be seen as an added benefit, almost as an additional attribute.

Quote No.	Participant	Related Theme	English Translation
Q11	P1	Theme 5	I think there is definitely a conflict. The core of luxury goods is uniqueness and scarcity. For example, in high jewellery, we use rare materials such as diamonds and gemstones, and these materials themselves are non-renewable. They are very unique. Once they are mined, they are gone. Sustainability emphasises circular use and reduced consumption, so the two are certainly contradictory. You want something rare, unique and non-renewable, while sustainability emphasises environmental protection and reduced consumption. ... If old gold is used and remade, that is a form of circular use. So this kind of contradiction exists, and sometimes it becomes a conflict.
Q12	P8	Theme 5	We previously tested a recycled wool fabric. All its indicators were very close to traditional wool, but after repeated friction, its pilling performance was slightly worse. Because of this single issue, the design team eventually refused to use it. The reason was very simple. They said customers would not accept a sweater that pills after being worn only a few times, no matter how environmentally friendly it is. This also made me realise that in the luxury industry, quality is a relatively absolute red line, and sustainability cannot cross that line. Scarcity and brand image are similar. Many senior managers worry that if sustainability is over-promoted, the brand may change from a maker of dreams into an environmental preacher, and may lose the distinctive, elevated and unconstrained charm of a luxury brand.
Q13	P14	Theme 5	For consumers, they may not care much about sustainability. What they care about is whether the product is easy to match, whether the texture is good, whether it looks good when carried outside, and whether it is comfortable to use. These are their most genuine needs. They also care about the product's price. These are the things they care about most. Another type of customer does not care at all about what material you use, or what recycled material is used in the bag. They may even just politely say, "I see." In another situation, they may say, "What does recyclability have to do with me?" They may even decide not to consider the product, because once they hear that it is recyclable, they feel it is a bit cheap or lowers the product's value.

Quote No.	Participant	Related Theme	English Translation
Q14	P3	Theme 6	I think the first challenge is the deep implementation of full-chain coordination. At present, most brands' sustainability practices are still concentrated on front-end product innovation and back-end operational carbon reduction, while supply chain coordination remains insufficient. For example, there are still gaps in production and processing, logistics and distribution, after-sales services such as used-product recycling, and environmental reuse. This leads to breakpoints in the sustainability system. For example, even if a brand uses sustainable raw materials, if the production factory does not meet environmental standards, it will still generate a large amount of carbon emissions. Similarly, if recycled-fabric products are launched at the front end, but the back end lacks a complete recycling channel, a closed loop cannot be achieved.
Q15	P10	Theme 6	Some of our third-party organisations, such as quality inspection and QC teams, are becoming increasingly professional. In the future, if brands only make superficial efforts or practice surface-level environmental protection, it will become even harder for them to stand. So I think, for all industry peers and brands, the biggest test and challenge is to put the slogan of sustainable development into real practice, remove the superficial label, and do concrete work. This means implementing sustainability across raw materials, production, logistics, terminals and recycling, and continuously improving data transparency so that consumers can feel assured.
Q16	P15	Theme 6 / Theme 5	I feel that one typical project that sounds beautiful in theory but is very difficult in practice is the full green transformation of high-end products and the building of a consumer-end circular system. It sounds like a perfect idea. It feels very impressive, and it also seems achievable. But in reality, there is real resistance in implementation. The first issue is the large-scale application of environmentally friendly materials. In theory, if some materials are replaced with low-carbon and circular materials, product-level green upgrading can be achieved. However, there are very few environmentally friendly materials that can match the high texture, high durability and high craftsmanship required by luxury products. If they are replaced, one aspect may be lost. The product may lose texture or durability, which means many environmentally friendly materials cannot meet the precision craftsmanship standards of watches. If we force the replacement, it will damage product quality. High-end products are ultimately selling quality. If quality is damaged, we cannot balance environmental protection with the texture and sense of luxury of luxury goods. This makes the difficulty very high.

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