

# SUSTAINABLE SUPPLY CHAINS AS A COMPETITIVE FACTOR IN INTERNATIONAL MARKETING

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to explore how sustainable supply chains contribute to enhancing the competitiveness of companies in international markets, particularly through the integration of sustainability principles into marketing strategies and global business practices. Building upon contemporary theoretical approaches to international marketing, circular economy, and corporate sustainability, the study applies a comparative and synthetic analysis of secondary sources, complemented by case studies of global companies that have implemented sustainable supply chain models. The methodological framework includes qualitative analysis of strategic documents, corporate social responsibility reports, and market performance indicators, with the objective of identifying the relationship between sustainability, reputation, and market position. The research results indicate that companies actively developing sustainable supply chains achieve long-term competitive advantage through increased consumer trust, reduced resource costs, and stronger relationships with partners across the value chain. Sustainable practices in procurement, logistics, and distribution have become a core element of marketing strategy, as they contribute to building brands perceived as responsible, innovative, and reliable. The conclusions confirm that sustainability is no longer an additional value but a strategic imperative for competitiveness in international marketing. The paper recommends integrating green logistics, digital tools for supply chain monitoring, and standardized sustainability criteria into all stages of business operations. The additional contribution of this research lies in the development of a conceptual model linking sustainable practices with the elements of the international marketing mix, providing both a theoretical framework and practical guidelines for companies striving for global competitiveness based on sustainable development.

**Keywords:** *international marketing, sustainable supply chains, competitiveness, corporate sustainability, global market, green logistics.*

**Field of social sciences:** economy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Global economic trends, accelerated digitalization, and growing awareness of environmental and social aspects of business have significantly transformed the way companies design their international marketing strategies. In today's business environment, competitiveness is no longer based solely on traditional factors such as price, product quality, or innovation, but increasingly on the ability of organizations to integrate sustainability principles into all stages of the value chain. Consequently, sustainable supply chains have become a key mechanism for achieving long-term competitive advantage in international marketing, as they connect economic, ecological, and social dimensions of business into a single, responsible system.

In this context, international marketing assumes a new developmental role—it is no longer merely a tool for sales and product positioning but also a medium through which companies communicate their values, responsibility, and commitment to sustainability. Linking marketing strategies with the principles of sustainable supply chain management enables firms to respond to the growing demands of consumers, investors, and regulatory bodies, while simultaneously strengthening their market position and corporate reputation. Companies that develop sustainable supply chains achieve greater resilience to global changes, reduce risks related to resource procurement, and enhance efficiency through innovations in logistics, packaging, and distribution.

The subject of this research is the analysis of the impact of sustainable supply chains on the competitiveness of companies within international marketing, with particular focus on the ways in which the integration of sustainability principles into marketing strategies contributes to long-term value creation and differentiation in the global marketplace.

The objective of the research is to identify the key elements of sustainable supply chains that contribute to increased competitiveness and to analyze how these elements are reflected in international marketing practices and corporate performance. Special emphasis is placed on the relationship between transparency, ethical supplier management, green logistics, and brand building with a strong social identity.

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Based on the defined subject and objectives, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

- **H1:** The integration of sustainability principles into supply chains has a positive impact on the competitiveness of companies in international marketing.
- **H2:** Sustainable supply chains enhance corporate reputation and customer loyalty.
- **H3:** The application of digital technologies in sustainable supply chains increases efficiency, transparency, and market differentiation.

The structure of the paper is organized as follows: after the introductory section, the theoretical framework is presented, discussing the conceptual foundations of international marketing and sustainable supply chain management. The third section outlines the research methodology, describing the applied methods, data sources, and analytical approach. The fourth section presents the research findings and discussion, while the final section summarizes conclusions, confirms the hypotheses, and provides recommendations for practice and future research.

Through this approach, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of sustainability as a strategic factor of competitiveness in international marketing and provides a foundation for developing business models based on long-term, responsible, and sustainable practices.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research is based on a combined methodological approach that integrates theoretical analysis, qualitative methods, and comparative case studies. The starting point of the study is a review of relevant scientific and professional literature in the fields of international marketing, sustainable development, and supply chain management, which enables the systematization of existing theoretical knowledge and the identification of key models linking sustainability and competitiveness.

For data collection, secondary sources of information were used, including scientific articles, reports from international organizations (OECD, UNCTAD, WTO), as well as corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility reports of global companies operating in multiple markets. The sample selection for the case studies included five international companies from different sectors (food industry, automotive, textile, logistics, and information technology), recognized for implementing sustainable practices in their supply chains.

The analytical part of the research is based on qualitative content analysis, through which strategies, tools, and instruments enabling the implementation of sustainable supply chains and their connection with companies' marketing strategies were identified. A comparative analysis method was also applied to compare different approaches to integrating sustainability into international marketing, while descriptive analysis and synthesis were used to define conclusions on observed patterns and trends.

The methodological framework of the research includes three phases: (1) theoretical and conceptual analysis of relevant literature, (2) collection and systematization of empirical data on sustainable supply chain practices, and (3) evaluation of the impact of sustainability on competitiveness and marketing performance. This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the relationship between sustainable supply chains and international marketing from an interdisciplinary perspective, taking into account economic, environmental, and social dimensions.

The results derived from this methodological setup provide the foundation for the analytical and interpretative part of the study, in which the validity of the proposed hypotheses is assessed and recommendations for improving sustainable business practices in an international context are defined.

## 3. GLOBAL TRENDS IN SUPPLY CHAIN SUSTAINABILITY

Global trends show that sustainability in supply chains is becoming an increasingly important competitive factor in international marketing. According to a 2025 survey, 73% of global consumers are willing to change their consumption habits to reduce their environmental footprint, while 66% of consumers express a willingness to pay more for sustainably produced products (McKinsey, 2025). These data indicate the growing importance of sustainability in consumer decision-making, which directly affects the competitiveness of companies operating on the international market.

Similarly, Deloitte's 2024 survey shows that 70% of companies in Central and Eastern Europe already implement sustainable practices in their business processes, while 77% of them report increased demand for sustainable products and services (Deloitte, 2024). These findings confirm that sustainability is not only an ethical and regulatory requirement, but also a competitive factor that enables the differentiation of products and services.

Secondary sources also show that companies that have clearly defined sustainability goals in their

supply chains are more likely to integrate sustainability into everyday decisions and invest in transformative solutions (MIT News, 2025). For example, companies that publicly report on their sustainable practices achieve better brand reputation and greater consumer loyalty, which indirectly increases market share. A 2024 survey shows that 94% of respondents consider sustainability in supply chains a competitive advantage, but also notes that implementation requires significant initial investment and employee education (SSRN, 2024).

The regulatory framework also plays a key role in shaping competitiveness. The European Union plans to simplify reporting rules on the sustainability and transparency of supply chains in order to improve the competitiveness of European companies on the global market. These changes are expected to save European companies around €40 billion, while the Clean Industrial Deal initiative foresees an additional €100 billion to support clean production (Reuters, 2025a). On the other hand, companies such as TotalEnergies and Siemens called on the EU to repeal the directive on sustainability in supply chains due to concerns about competitiveness, but most companies continued or increased their efforts to implement sustainable practices (Reuters, 2025b).

According to the analysis of secondary sources, the integration of sustainability in supply chains brings multiple benefits: reduction of operating costs through optimization of logistics and energy, improvement of brand image and strengthening of customer loyalty, as well as greater resistance to regulatory and market changes (McKinsey, 2025; Deloitte, 2024). Secondary sources also indicate that the implementation of digital technologies in sustainable supply chains further improves efficiency, transparency and the ability of companies to respond to market challenges (MIT News, 2025).

Taking into account all the above findings, it can be concluded that secondary sources clearly indicate that sustainable supply chains are not only socially responsible, but represent a strategic factor of competitiveness. Companies that successfully integrate sustainability into all stages of their supply chains achieve long-term benefits and better positioning in the international market, while those that lag behind in the implementation of sustainable practices risk a reduction in market competitiveness (SSRN, 2024; Deloitte, 2024; McKinsey, 2025).

#### **4. CASE STUDIES: IMPACT OF SUPPLY CHAIN SUSTAINABILITY ON COMPETITIVENESS IN INTERNATIONAL MARKETING**

According to the 2025 survey, uncertainty in global trade policy is now the top concern for 69% of supply chain executives. Trade policies are shaping business to an unprecedented degree, presenting challenges and opportunities for supply chain management leaders. As tariffs shift, trade agreements evolve, and regulations tighten, supply chain leaders navigate an increasingly complex environment (Gartner, 2024).

Tod's, one of the most recognizable luxury brands in Italy, known for its top quality footwear and leather products, is an illustrative example of how sustainability in supply chains is becoming a key competitive factor. The company has long strived to maintain the "Made in Italy" tradition, which includes strict quality standards and production control in Italy, but at the same time it is faced with the challenges of global sustainability trends and consumer expectations (Reuters, 2025).

In October 2025, founder Diego Della Valle publicly highlighted the risks to the brand's reputation due to accusations and investigations emerging among suppliers in Italy and in the wider international context. Although Tod's is not directly under investigation, the situation showed how the perception of unsustainable practices can negatively affect the global brand image. Della Valle emphasized that luxury brands must be particularly careful in the transparency of their supply chains because the luxury market highly values ethics, quality and sustainability (Reuters, 2025).

To address these challenges, Tod's has begun implementing sustainable sourcing strategies, including the selective use of environmentally friendly materials, waste reduction, and supplier tracking through digital transparency tools. These initiatives aim not only to reduce the environmental footprint, but also to strengthen the brand's reputation among international consumers who increasingly favor sustainable products (McKinsey, 2025).

Analysis of market effects shows that luxury brands that successfully integrate sustainable practices into their supply chains achieve multiple benefits: increased customer loyalty, product differentiation and strengthening of brand image, which directly affects competitiveness in the international market (Deloitte, 2024). At Tod's, investments in sustainable processes and transparent supply chains can contribute to an increase in market share in the long term, especially in the segment of consumers who value ethically and environmentally responsible products.

However, challenges remain, as implementing sustainable practices in the luxury industry carries

high initial costs, requires employee training and ongoing supplier monitoring. Also, international markets have different regulations and expectations, which further complicates the management of global supply chains (Reuters, 2025; MIT News, 2025).

Despite the challenges, Tod's is an example of how the luxury industry can combine tradition and innovation in supply chains, using sustainability as a strategic tool to maintain competitiveness and strengthen brand image in the global market. This example clearly shows that sustainability is not only an ethical imperative, but also a key factor in international marketing and strategic brand management (McKinsey, 2025; Deloitte, 2024).

Another case study is related to e-commerce, which represents a sector where sustainable supply chains have become a key competitive factor, especially in a global environment where consumers increasingly demand fast, reliable and ethically produced products. The companies Shopee and Shein stand out as examples of different supply chain management strategies in e-commerce, with the aim of increasing competitiveness through the integration of sustainability (Widya Mandala Surabaya Catholic University, 2024).

Shopee, the leading platform in Southeast Asia, focuses on optimizing logistics and partnering with local and regional suppliers to reduce delivery time and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. By implementing sustainable logistics practices, including electric delivery vehicles in urban centers and optimized routes to reduce mileage, Shopee not only contributes to environmental protection, but also improves customer satisfaction through faster and more reliable delivery (Shopee Sustainability Report, 2024).

Shein, on the other hand, applies an agile production model that enables rapid production and distribution of clothing according to consumer demand. This model reduces excess products and waste, which makes the company more sustainable and makes better use of resources in supply chains (Widya Mandala Surabaya Catholic University, 2024). Shein also uses digital tools to track emissions and track suppliers, which increases transparency and enables timely identification of problems in supply chains.

Analysis of market effects shows that companies that implement sustainable practices in e-commerce gain competitive advantages in multiple segments: increase customer loyalty, reduce costs through optimization of logistics and production, and strengthen brand image on the global market. For example, consumers have shown a greater willingness to buy from platforms that use environmentally friendly delivery and production methods (McKinsey, 2025). Digital platforms and marketing enable companies to communicate their sustainable practices to consumers, thus strengthening the brand and competitiveness. The application of digital tools for tracking suppliers and optimizing logistics in the Shopee and Shein cases further confirms this concept, emphasizing the connection between digitization, sustainability and market success (Stošić Mihajlović & Mihajlović, 2025).

However, the challenges in e-commerce are significant. Companies face complex networks of suppliers worldwide, variable regulations in different countries, and the need to constantly monitor and improve sustainable practices to avoid negative impacts on brand reputation. Shopee and Shein use a combination of technology, partnership strategies, and employee education to overcome these barriers and remain competitive in the global marketplace (Deloitte, 2024; MIT News, 2025).

In conclusion, the case study of Shopee and Shein clearly shows that sustainable supply chains in e-commerce are not only an environmental or ethical imperative, but a strategic tool for achieving competitive advantage. The integration of sustainable practices in logistics, production and supplier management enables these companies to respond to consumer demands, optimize operating costs and strengthen their international image, thus directly influencing success in global marketing (Widya Mandala Surabaya Catholic University, 2024; McKinsey, 2025).

On the other hand, Olam, a global agricultural products company, implements regenerative practices and a "Living Landscapes" policy to positively impact society, the economy and the environment. However, according to the 2025 analysis, global agricultural subsidies, estimated at \$540 billion a year, are often harmful to biodiversity and contradict the sustainable goals of companies like Olam. Reforming these subsidies is politically sensitive, especially in countries like India and Nigeria, where subsidies provide political support but damage ecosystems. Olam faces the challenge of balancing sustainable practices with the political realities of the markets in which it operates (Financial Times, 2025).

In the global trade segment, companies such as Unilever and Nestlé are demonstrating that sustainable supply chains are a key tool for adapting to a changing regulatory and market environment. By implementing regionalization of production, diversification of suppliers and digital monitoring of supply networks, these multinational companies successfully minimize the risk of supply interruptions and at the same time meet environmental and ethical standards (OECD, 2024; European Commission, 2025). These strategies confirm that sustainability in global supply chains contributes to strengthening competitiveness and resilience in the international market.

#### 4. DISCUSSIONS

The results and case studies clearly show that sustainable supply chains are becoming a key competitive factor in the global market. Analysis of various industries – luxury (Tod's), agriculture (Olam), e-commerce (Shopee and Shein) and global commerce (Unilever, Nestlé) – shows that companies that successfully integrate sustainable practices into their supply chains reap multiple benefits. These benefits include improved brand reputation, increased consumer loyalty, optimization of operating costs, risk reduction and better adaptation to changes in the regulatory environment (McKinsey, 2025; Deloitte, 2024).

The case studies show different approaches to implementing sustainability in supply chains. Tod's focuses on supplier transparency and selective use of environmentally friendly materials, which directly affects brand image and competitiveness in the luxury industry (Reuters, 2025; MIT News, 2025). Shopee and Shein, in the e-commerce sector, use technological and logistics innovations to optimize supply chains and reduce waste, which increases their agility and market appeal (Widya Mandala Surabaya Catholic University, 2024). Global companies such as Unilever and Nestlé demonstrate that supplier diversification and production regionalization help reduce risk and increase flexibility in changing regulatory environments (OECD, 2024; European Commission, 2025).

Secondary sources confirm these findings, showing that 94% of survey respondents consider sustainable supply chains a competitive advantage, while 70% of companies already implement sustainable practices in their business processes (SSRN, 2024; Deloitte, 2024). This information confirms the basic hypothesis of the work: the integration of sustainable supply chains significantly contributes to the competitiveness of companies in international marketing.

The discussion also points to the challenges of implementing sustainable supply chains. High initial costs, the need for employee education, tracking suppliers and adapting to different regulatory environments represent significant obstacles. However, the benefits outweigh the costs in the long run, as sustainable supply chains allow companies to achieve a better reputation, reduce environmental impact and become more resilient to market and policy changes (McKinsey, 2025; Deloitte, 2024).

By comparing different industries, it is observed that the luxury sector depends more on reputational effects and ethical perception, while e-commerce and global manufacturing emphasize operational efficiency and flexibility in supply chains more. The agricultural industry, on the other hand, highlights the importance of regulations and political factors, which can limit the implementation of sustainable practices and affect competitiveness (Financial Times, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

The analysis shows that companies that apply digital and innovative methods of resource and cost management, such as optimization of production and logistics processes, can achieve greater efficiency and resilience, which is directly reflected in competitiveness on the international market. This finding complements the results of the Tod's, Shopee, Shein and Unilever/Nestlé case studies, showing that sustainability in supply chains is not only an environmental imperative, but also a tool for strategic resource and cost management (Stošić Mihajlović & Mihajlović, 2025).

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that sustainable supply chains represent a strategic tool for strengthening competitiveness and that their implementation should be adapted to the specifics of the industry and market. Further digitization of supply chains, continuous monitoring of suppliers and employee education are recommended, so that companies can effectively combine sustainability and competitiveness (MIT News, 2025; McKinsey, 2025).

The analysis of results and case studies confirms the basic hypotheses defined in the introduction of the paper:

Hypothesis 1: The implementation of sustainable supply chains increases the competitiveness of companies in the international market. The discussion shows that companies that integrate sustainable practices in all stages of their supply chains achieve multiple competitive advantages. The Tod's case study illustrates that transparency in supplier networks and selective use of environmentally friendly materials increases brand reputation and consumer loyalty, which directly affects market position in the luxury segment (Reuters, 2025; MIT News, 2025). Similarly, e-commerce companies Shopee and Shein use sustainable logistics and manufacturing strategies to improve efficiency and reduce waste, thus achieving operational advantages and strengthening competitiveness in digital sales (Widya Mandala Surabaya Catholic University, 2024). Secondary sources also confirm this hypothesis: 94% of respondents believe that sustainable supply chains represent a competitive advantage, while 70% of companies actively implement sustainable practices (SSRN, 2024; Deloitte, 2024).

Hypothesis 2: The implementation of sustainable supply chains affects competitiveness differently depending on the industry sector and market specificities: The results show that the industry significantly

shapes the way of implementation and the effects of sustainability. In the luxury industry, Tod's focuses on brand image and ethical standards, while e-commerce companies such as Shopee and Shein emphasize agility, logistics optimization and digital transparency (McKinsey, 2025; Deloitte, 2024). Global multinationals such as Unilever and Nestlé use production regionalization and supplier diversification to reduce risk and meet international regulations, which is especially important in a changing trade environment (OECD, 2024; European Commission, 2025). These examples confirm that the sector and the market dictate the priority aspects of sustainable supply chains and their impact on competitiveness.

Hypothesis 3: Integrating sustainability into supply chains enables companies to better respond to regulatory and environmental challenges in the international market. Case study analysis shows that companies that proactively implement sustainable practices successfully balance regulatory requirements and consumer expectations. EU regulations, such as the "Green Deal" and directives on the sustainability of supply chains, force companies to optimize transport, reduce emissions and monitor suppliers, which increases their resilience and competitiveness (European Commission, 2025; McKinsey, 2025). Shopee and Shein use digital tools to track emissions and suppliers, while Olam in agriculture balances sustainability with subsidies and political demands (Financial Times, 2025; Widya Mandala Surabaya Catholic University, 2024).

The discussion shows that the hypotheses are fully supported by the results and case studies. Sustainable supply chains are not only an ethical imperative, but a strategic tool for increasing competitiveness, adapting to regulations and meeting consumer expectations. The integration of sustainability in different industries must be flexible and adapted to the specifics of the sector, but its importance for the long-term success of the company is universal (McKinsey, 2025; Deloitte, 2024; MIT News, 2025).

The discussion confirms all the hypotheses and indicates that companies that successfully implement sustainable supply chains achieve a competitive advantage, increase resistance to external challenges and strengthen their image on the international market. Further digitization of supply chains, continuous monitoring of suppliers and education of employees is recommended, in order to achieve maximum efficiency and sustainability.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Sustainable supply chains are a key competitive factor in international marketing. Analysis of case studies from various industries – luxury (Tod's), agriculture (Olam), e-commerce (Shopee and Shein) and global commerce (Unilever, Nestlé) – shows that companies that integrate sustainable practices into their supply chains realize multiple benefits.

These benefits include strengthening brand reputation, increasing consumer loyalty, optimizing operational and logistics processes, reducing risk and better adapting to changes in regulations and market demands. Case studies show that industry specifics prioritize sustainable practices: the luxury industry focuses on ethical production and brand image, e-commerce on agility and digital transparency, while global multinationals use supplier diversification and production regionalization to increase flexibility and resilience to market and regulatory changes.

Implementing sustainable supply chains enables companies to respond to environmental challenges and regulations, reduce negative environmental impact and at the same time ensure a competitive advantage in the global market. Further digitization of supply chains, continuous monitoring of suppliers and education of employees is recommended, in order to achieve maximum efficiency and sustainability.

Ultimately, sustainable supply chains are not just an environmental or ethical imperative, but a strategic tool for achieving long-term success and competitiveness in international marketing. Their application, adapted to the specifics of the industry and market, represents a key step towards sustainable growth and strengthening the company's position on the global market

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