Review article / Pregledni rad

THE ROLE OF SUSTAINABLE MARKETING IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY TOWARDS A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

Concern for sustainability is becoming a central topic in political, scientific, and professional discussions, with increasing emphasis being placed on adapting industrial actors to sustainable practices and the circular economy. Numerous industries have been identified as major sources of pollution and natural resource consumption, with the textile industry standing out in particular, presenting a range of sustainability challenges, from the degradation of water resources and intensive land use for cotton cultivation to the generation of substantial waste during the production of clothing and other textile products. To prevent this, it is necessary to transform the traditional linear model of textile production and consumption by implementing an advanced digital business model that promotes sustainable solutions and circularity. The introduction of circular economy principles driven by digital solutions extends product life cycles and promotes sustainable practices such as recycling, reuse, exchange, buy-back, and more. This paper explores how sustainable marketing can drive the transformation of the textile industry towards circular business models supported by digital solutions. It analyzes strategies that incorporate ecological and ethical principles into communication, consumer relations, and branding, with the aim of promoting sustainable products and responsible behavior within industries. Using case studies and existing

research, the paper identifies approaches that support a sustainable transition in the textile sector.

KEYWORDS: sustainability, sustainable marketing, circular economy, textile industry, business process improvement, digital technologies

ULOGA ODRŽIVOG MARKETINGA U TRANSFORMACIJI TEKSTILNE INDUSTRIJE PREMA CIRKULARNOJ EKONOMIJI

SAŽETAK

Zabrinutost za održivost postaje središnja tema političkih, znanstvenih i stručnih rasprava, pri čemu se sve veći naglasak stavlja na prilagodbu industrijskih aktera održivim praksama i kružnom gospodarstvu. Brojne industrije identificirane su kao glavni izvori onečišćenja i potrošnje prirodnih resursa, pri čemu se tekstilna industrija posebno ističe, pokrećući niz izazova za održivost, od degradacije vodnih resursa i intenzivnog korištenja zemljišta za uzgoj pamuka, do stvaranja znatnih količina otpada tijekom proizvodnje odjeće i drugih tekstilnih proizvoda. Kako bi se to spriječilo, potrebno je izmijeniti tradicionalni linearni model proizvodnje i potrošnje tekstila te primijeniti unaprijeđeni digitalni poslovni model koji promovira održiva rješenja i cirkularnost. Uvođenje principa cirkularne ekonomije vođene digitalnim rješenjima, produžuje životni vijek proizvoda te promiče održive prakse kao što su reciklaža, ponovna upotreba, razmjena, otkup i druge. Ovaj rad istražuje kako održivi marketing može potaknuti transformaciju tekstilne industrije prema cirkularnim modelima poslovanja podržanih digitalnim rješenjima. Pri tom se analiziraju strategije koje uključuju ekološka i etička načela u komunikaciju, odnose s potrošačima i brendiranje, s ciljem promicanja održivih proizvoda i odgovornog ponašanja unutar industrija. Korištenjem studije slučaja i dosadašnjih istraživanja, rad identificira pristupe koji podržavaju održivu tranziciju u tekstilnom sektoru.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: održivost, održivi marketing, cirkularna ekonomija, tekstilna industrija, unapređenje poslovnih procesa, digitalne tehnologije

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is increasingly taking the position of one of the key global priorities, which is primarily driven by the necessity of mitigating environmental degradation, more rational management of natural resources, and a more effective response to the challenges of climate change (Vilkaite-Vaitone, 2024). Contemporary business entities are increasingly recognizing the strategic importance of sustainable practices, integrating them into their operational models in order to ensure balanced ecological, social, and economic development (Adwan & Altrjman, 2024; Gregurec et al., 2025; Yadav et al., 2018). In this context, particular attention is required by the textile industry, whose negative impacts on the environment and intensive consumption of resources clearly illustrate the need for systematic implementation of sustainable practices.

The textile industry, as one of the largest polluters and consumers of resources, is facing the need for a radical change in business models (Denić et al., 2021). Traditional linear models of production and consumption are not sustainable, and their transformation towards circular models implies the integration of ecological, social, and economic principles. Sustainable marketing has a role in enabling and communicating sustainable practices. Marketing in this research represents a means for promoting sustainable behavior (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2020).

The purpose of the paper is to present, through analysis and synthesis, how sustainable marketing, in combination with digital solutions, contributes to the transition of the textile industry towards circular economy models. This research represents a review scientific paper that combines theoretical literature analysis and a qualitative case study. The goal is to synthesize existing knowledge on the application of sustainable marketing and digital technologies in general, and then in the context of the circular economy in the textile industry. The case study is used to demonstrate the concrete application of theoretical frameworks in practice.

The following research question is posed in the paper: *How can sustainable marketing encourage and support the transformation of the textile industry towards circular business models?* The paper is structured as follows. After the introductory part, the applied methodology is presented, which served to achieve the research objectives and obtain answers to the posed research question. The following section analyzes relevant scientific literature and presents the results of the conducted research. Special emphasis is placed on the presentation of a practical example that illustrates the application of theoretical frameworks in a specific context. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and final considerations.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a review approach (*narrative literature review*) combined with a qualitative analysis of a practical example. The analysis is based on secondary sources, including scientific articles (Scopus, Web of Science (WoS)) relevant to sustainable marketing, digital technologies, the circular economy, and the transformation of the textile sector. The selection of literature was guided by criteria of relevance (2015–2025), peer review, and citation frequency.

For the purpose of systematizing insights on the role of digital technologies in sustainable marketing, a targeted literature search was conducted using the keywords: *„sustainable marketing" AND „digital technologies"*, in the title, abstract, and keywords. The search was carried out in the Scopus and WoS databases. In the Scopus database, eleven papers were identified, while four were found in the WoS database, all of which were already included in the Scopus results. After excluding three unavailable articles from the Scopus database and one that does not fit the scope of this research, seven scientific papers were selected for the final analysis. These papers served to examine key findings related to the concept of sustainable marketing and the specific role of digital technologies in its application. Additionally, relevant papers on the topic of the circular economy and the transformation of the textile sector were included. A total of fourteen additional papers were included.

As an example of good practice, initiatives of various organizations were analyzed, which base their business models on the principles of the circular economy, particularly in the

segment of extending the lifespan of textile products through digitally mediated exchange. Although the business models of the selected organizations do not achieve full circularity in terms of a closed-loop production and recycling system, their role in extending the lifespan of textile products makes them a significant example of the transition towards more sustainable consumption patterns in the textile industry.

3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The following section presents the key findings from the literature. First, the authors examine the concept of sustainable marketing and analyze the role of digital technologies in its application in the contemporary business environment. Furthermore, the authors analyze the concept of the circular economy, with a particular focus on new business models within the textile sector that integrate sustainability principles. Finally, the findings from both areas are combined, and common conclusions are defined.

3.1. SUSTAINABLE MARKETING AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

Previous research confirms that sustainable marketing goes beyond traditional promotional strategies because it integrates ecological and ethical principles into communication and consumer relationships (Bryła et al., 2022; Oka & Subadra, 2024). In this context, digital technologies are recognized as a key driver of their implementation, especially in industries facing significant environmental challenges. Digital technologies enable not only the redefinition of the role of marketing but also the active guidance of marketing activities (and ultimately consumers) toward sustainable products and practices. In the contemporary market context, consumers are becoming increasingly critical and inclined to evaluate brands through the lens of their environmental and social impacts (Masengu et al., 2023; Subramanya Iyer et al., 2024). In response to these changes, organizations increasingly turn to various technological mechanisms to achieve their environmental goals and strengthen sustainable practices (Masengu et al., 2023). One of the most significant contributions of digital technologies to sustainable marketing is reflected in the use of tools such as artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), big data, blockchain technology, digital platforms, e-commerce platforms, social media, advanced CRM systems, and many others.

AI enables personalized communication and precise targeting based on actual consumer data and their environmental preferences (Gündüzyeli, 2025; Kumar et al., 2025; Masengu et al., 2023). This increases the effectiveness of campaigns aimed at promoting sustainable products and behaviors, while simultaneously enhancing organizational agility and encouraging the integration of sustainability into marketing practices (Gündüzyeli, 2025). **IoT** sensors and systems are used to collect and interpret data on resource consumption, ensuring operational efficiency and environmental awareness within organizations (Kumar et al., 2025). **Big data analytics** provides organizations with deeper insights into resource usage and their ecological footprint, influencing process optimization and waste reduction (Subramanya Iyer et al., 2024). At the same time, the analysis of large datasets reveals valuable insights about consumers and their environmental attitudes, making data a foundation for developing sustainable business strategies (Kumar et al., 2025). **Blockchain** technology enables the verification of material origins, eco-certifications, and product carbon footprints (Kumar et al., 2025), enhancing business transparency and strengthening consumer trust (Subramanya Iyer et al., 2024). Furthermore, this technology increases the credibility of sustainable messages, as it allows verification of the origin of raw materials and processes within the

supply chain (Masengu et al., 2023). The promotion of sustainable behaviors, such as ethical consumption and zero-waste practices, is increasingly represented on **digital platforms** and through influencer marketing (Kumar et al., 2025; Masengu et al., 2023) encouraging consumers to use sustainable products (Subramanya Iyer et al., 2024). **E-commerce platforms** are increasingly introducing sustainability filters and eco-labeling systems, making it easier for environmentally conscious consumers to make informed purchasing decisions (Kumar et al., 2025; Masengu et al., 2023). **Social media** represents another significant tool of sustainable marketing. Its use goes beyond promotional purposes, enabling education and awareness-building about circular practices through storytelling, influencer marketing, and participatory campaigns, which is particularly prominent among younger consumers who value authenticity and social responsibility (Khan et al., 2019; Subramanya Iyer et al., 2024). The application of **CRM systems** allows for personalized communication, consumer satisfaction analysis, and the promotion of loyalty through corporate social responsibility marketing, which improves organizational trust and image while promoting their sustainable marketing outcomes (Acheampong et al., 2023).

In the contemporary context, where visual communication shapes consumers' relationships with products and services, sustainable packaging and product design play a crucial role. They function as a communication strategy that strengthens the perceived value of products while simultaneously contributing to waste reduction (Masengu et al., 2023). Research shows that digital technologies significantly help bridge the gap between marketing theory and practice, enabling faster implementation of sustainability concepts in industrial settings and aligning core organizational activities with environmental imperatives (Foltean, 2019).

From these findings, it can be concluded that digital technologies do not merely support sustainable marketing but constitute a fundamental component in the transition toward a circular economy. Their application enables the development of more precise, transparent, and scalable strategies that simultaneously link sustainability, digital technologies, and market competitiveness. Environmental responsibility encourages the academic community and managers to systematically investigate and incorporate sustainability issues into marketing approaches. This emphasizes the need to adopt new mindsets, principles, concepts, and tools in marketing, with the aim of creating sustainable competitive advantages and ensuring organizational growth in an environmentally responsible manner.

3.2. CIRCULAR ECONOMY AND THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY

Previous research shows that the transition of the textile industry from a linear to a circular model is a complex process, requiring technical innovations and a strategic change in business practices and market communication (Aloini et al., 2020; Camacho-Otero et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2021). In 2016, the textile industry was estimated at $1.3 trillion and employed over 300 million people worldwide (Denić et al., 2021). Of the total amount of textile used, as much as 60% goes to clothing waste (Denić et al., 2021).

The adoption of circular production principles is promising, especially for manufacturers seeking to reduce material consumption and resource toxicity (Acerbi & Taisch, 2020). Several authors emphasize that the implementation of circular solutions is not possible without systematic support through digital technologies and a shift in end-user perception (Abdelmeguid et al., 2024; Aloini et al., 2020). Although strategies such as recycling and reuse are increasingly present in the textile industry, they often remain at lower levels due to the lack of a comprehensive transformation of the business model (Brydges, 2021; Stumpf et

al., 2021). In this context, sustainable marketing and digital technologies become methods for operationalizing sustainable practices, as well as for building trust, educating consumers, and differentiating brands in the market (Camacho-Otero et al., 2019; Leal Filho et al., 2019). Transparency, emotional branding, and a value-based approach can significantly increase the acceptance of circular offerings and facilitate the adoption of new habits among consumers, which is important for the long-term sustainability of business operations (Dehghannejad et al., 2025; Dragomir & Dumitru, 2022). Furthermore, research confirms that the integration of digital technologies facilitates the operational implementation of circular economy strategies and enhances their credibility in the market (Horn et al., 2023; Salem & Mahmoud, 2019). From previous studies, it can be concluded that the combination of sustainable marketing and digital support represents an opportunity for the successful transition of the textile industry toward a circular economy.

4. ANALYSIS OF A GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES

Understanding and reviewing sustainability in the textile industry involves assessing the impact of textile production, processing, and consumption on the environment, economy, and society. Key components of a sustainability review in the textile industry include (1) *the design of sustainable products and materials*, (2) *the promotion and development of responsible raw materials* considering environmental and social criteria, and (3) *the product life cycle*. A sustainability review of the textile industry can help identify and implement measures to improve environmental, economic, and social outcomes, with the use of digital technologies, ensuring long-term stability in the sector (Rathore, 2023).

Numerous textile companies have realized that their operations threaten the future of younger generations; therefore, they are designing business models that extend the lifespan of their products, implement sustainable production principles, and seek to mitigate negative impacts on stakeholders. The following section presents examples of specific textile companies and their sustainable business models.

Example 1: Hennes and Mauritz (H&M)

The activities included in H&M's business model are as follows:

- 100% of products are made from recycled cotton or come from sustainable sources: by 2030, H&M aims for all products to be made from recycled and other sustainable materials;
- Safe working environment and fair and equal labor conditions: all H&M business partners are required to sign the "Sustainability Commitment," which represents a set of standards for fair labor, adequate working conditions, animal welfare, and more;
- Garment take-back program: in H&M stores, customers can return old clothing, which is then sorted for reuse or recycling, while customers receive a discount that can be used in H&M stores;
- Rental, repair, and second-hand services: the H&M Take Care concept is available on H&M digital marketplaces and provides guidance and products that help customers care for their clothing (H&M, n.d.).

At the global level, H&M pays great attention to all dimensions of sustainability, which is why their website features a special focus and stories highlighting their commitment. They have defined clear sustainability goals related to the areas of *(a) Climate, (b) Materials and Resources, (c) Packaging, (d) Chemicals, (e) Water, and (f) Fair and Equal Approach*. Goals

related to *Climate* focus on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, while the *Materials and Resources* area includes the procurement of materials certified as recycled. In the *Packaging* area, the goal is to minimize plastic packaging. In the *Chemicals* area, the objective is to reduce the input of chemical resources in accordance with the Restricted Substances List, while the *Water* area involves reducing water usage in production facilities. The *Fair and Equal Approach* includes ambitions related to respecting human rights across the value chain (H&M Group, n.d.). H&M prepares a detailed annual sustainability report measuring parameters that demonstrate their contributions to economic, environmental, and social sustainability (H&M Group, 2024). Additionally, they actively promote their sustainability story in digital environments, aiming to raise awareness about important sustainability issues.

H&M actively promotes sustainable activities through social media and its e-commerce platform, where it emphasizes the eco-friendly characteristics of its products. Beyond promotional activities, H&M seeks to improve its business model by ensuring sustainable principles throughout the value chain. One important project is *TextileGenesis*, which uses blockchain technology to track the creation of a garment, including every process involved and the locations of farms, facilities, factories, and other sites where these processes took place. In this way, blockchain technology records the story of the garment, *TextileGenesis* shares it through a digital platform, and the H&M Group team explores how to scale it (H&M Group, 2021).

Example 2: Nike

Nike has turned to sustainable strategies through the following programs:

- Recycling + Donation: an approach where customers can bring their used sportswear and footwear to Nike stores – You Drop It Off – while Nike experts sort and determine the suitability of the products for recycling or donation – We Sort It – and ultimately take action by either cleaning and donating the items through the *Soles4Souls program* (Soles4Souls, n.d.) or sending them for recycling through the *Nike Grind* program (Nike Grind, n.d.) – We Take Action – (Nike, n.d.-b).
- Nike Circular Design: guidelines for future design based on the principle of circularity, including how materials are sourced, how products are made and used, returned, and ultimately redesigned and reimagined (Nike, n.d.-a).

For the circular design and development of Nike sneakers, a digital platform has been created that allows users to track the entire process step by step, as well as to learn about the circular approach to working with textile products. The platform is open to users, free of charge, and offers engaging educational content related to circularity in the textile industry.

Example 3: Inditex (Zara)

The activities through which Zara seeks to contribute to sustainability include the following programs:

- Zara Pre-owned: a program that allows for the repair, donation, or resale of clothing previously purchased at Zara. The program is based on a platform approach, meaning that Zara Pre-owned relies on a digital platform that enables the extension of the lifespan of Zara's products (Orešković, 2024).
- Zara Resell: a program through which all Zara customers can buy or sell previously used Zara clothing, all facilitated via a digital platform open to all users (Orešković, 2024), (Zara Pre-Owned, n.d.).

The analyzed textile companies have shown that they are transforming their existing business models toward circular business principles. Among digital solutions, textile companies most commonly turn to digital platforms that allow them to collect old, used textile products, which are then directed toward circular economy activities – repair, reuse, recycle, donate, and others.

However, it should be emphasized that the textile industry is associated with a sustainability paradox, where its actual contribution is questionable despite efforts to adapt business models to circular principles. Large fast-fashion companies leave a significant footprint that undermines sustainability in every aspect, which can be described as a sustainability paradox in the textile industry, reflecting conflicts in organizational goals, product design, and value chain structures (Dehghannejad et al., 2025). For example, research shows that Zara still records poor sustainability performance, with the environmental, economic, and social dimensions being compromised (Lily, 2024), (Chibuzor, 2025).

5. CONCLUSION

Global textile and fashion companies, driven by fast fashion and the need to meet the demands of a growing global population, pose a significant threat to sustainability. Although industrial development policies are increasingly oriented toward digital and sustainable business principles, balancing business objectives with sustainability goals remains challenging. Nevertheless, efforts are being made, and textile companies, with the help of digital technologies, are making progress in adhering to the principles of a sustainable circular economy.

Among digital technologies, the most prevalent are digital platforms that connect customers with textile companies, allowing old textiles or products to be reintroduced into processes for recycling, processing, or resale. This process is supported by social media technologies, e-commerce platforms, and CRM systems. In the production context and throughout the textile industry value chain, the value of digital technologies such as blockchain and sensors has been recognized, enabling traceability of materials used in the production of textile products. With population growth, artificial intelligence and big data technologies play an important role by supporting demand forecasting, which can help limit production volumes and, consequently, reduce the ecological footprint.

Despite the support of digital technologies and the functionalities they provide, the paradox of the textile industry, rooted in the misalignment between the business objectives of textile leaders and the goals of sustainable development, remains a major challenge for future well-being. As long as sustainable development goals and the circular economy serve merely as a “marketing gimmick” to attract customers rather than a genuine obligation, achieving significant progress in sustainability contributions will be difficult.

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