

# Unveiling Corporate Social Responsibility in Global Fashion: Insights from Supply Chain Management

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**Abstract:** The global fashion industry is one of the largest contributors to environmental degradation and ethical concerns, yet consumer awareness regarding fast fashion and sweatshop labor remains relatively low. This limited awareness is reflected in the scarcity of research focused on Corporate social responsibility (CSR) implementation within fashion supply chains. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the attributes, tools, and challenges of CSR implementation in the supply chains of the world's ten most valuable fashion brands in 2022. This research identifies key drivers influencing fashion companies to adopt CSR practices across their supply chains, distinguishing between external pressures—such as regulatory requirements, media scrutiny, and consumer expectations—and internal motivations, including brand differentiation, competitive advantage, and risk mitigation. The study further explores the divergent CSR approaches taken by luxury brands, which emphasize exclusivity and craftsmanship, versus fast fashion firms, which prioritize cost efficiency and public image enhancement. Our findings indicate that while CSR initiatives yield significant benefits, including enhanced brand reputation, increased customer loyalty, and supply chain resilience, companies face substantial barriers in their implementation. These include fragmented regulatory landscapes, inconsistencies in supplier compliance, and risks of greenwashing, where firms engage in misleading sustainability claims without substantive environmental or social impact. Additionally, the complexity of global supply chains poses challenges in enforcing uniform CSR standards across diverse regions with varying economic and legal conditions. The insights presented in this study provide valuable guidance for fashion industry leaders, top management, and policymakers striving to enhance CSR strategies. By fostering a more transparent and accountable approach to sustainability, fashion brands can align corporate objectives with broader environmental and social responsibilities. The study underscores the necessity of genuine, long-term CSR commitments rather than superficial measures aimed at reputation management. Our conclusions offer practical recommendations for strengthening CSR governance and improving sustainable supply chain practices in the fashion sector.

**Keywords:** Corporate social responsibility, Responsible behaviour, Fast fashion, Sweatshop, Supply chain management, Stakeholders

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## 1. Introduction

Prior to 2000, the fashion industry operated on a predictable seasonal cycle, with designers planning collections months in advance based on anticipated trends. However, in the early 2000s, the imitation of high-fashion designs and the rapid emergence of fast fashion characterized by accelerated production cycles and significantly lower price points transformed the industry (The Sustainable Living Guide, 2021). Globalization facilitated the outsourcing of production to developing countries, where exploitative practices such as child labor, unsafe working conditions, and sweatshops became prevalent. As public awareness of these unethical practices grew, the notion of “ethical production” emerged, prompting companies to implement radical changes in their supply chain management to sustain their market competitiveness (Corban, 2018).

Building on existing research and addressing the persistent gap in understanding CSR implementation within fashion industry supply chains, this study examines the tools, benefits, and barriers associated with CSR from a supply chain management perspective. Utilizing a qualitative approach informed by grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2007), the investigation focuses on the ten most valuable global fashion brands of 2022. Secondary data including information from 52 websites, 3 case studies, 37 articles, 10 magazines, 5 documentaries, and 12 press releases (with 4 interviews) were synthesized using an inductive-deductive methodology to generate a comprehensive diagram of CSR attributes. The article adds to both theoretical understanding and practical application. The study contributes to current research by identifying the attributes of CSR implementation in fashion industry supply chains and provides important insights for successful CSR implementation in the supply chain.

The study highlights the benefits of CSR adoption, such as improved brand reputation, customer loyalty, and risk mitigation related to negative public perceptions. CSR also fosters sustainable practices, particularly in environmental sustainability and resource management. However, barriers like legal inconsistencies, managing supplier behavior, and the conflict between fast fashion trends and sustainability goals remain. Greenwashing undermines the effectiveness of CSR efforts. These findings offer a comprehensive understanding of CSR complexities and provide valuable insights for researchers and practitioners in the fashion industry. The paper

is divided into the following sections. Section 2 provides theoretical background and research questions, section 3 presents the data and methodology, section 4 shows the results and discusses the findings. The final section concludes this paper, including implications, limitations, and future research.

## **2. Theory, Literature Review and Research Questions**

### **2.1 Definition of CSR in Supply Chain Management**

Vishwanathan et al. (2020) define CSR as corporate activities that benefit society and generate profit by enhancing reputation, stakeholder cooperation, risk reduction, and innovation. CSR builds sustainable competitive advantage through differentiation, leading to abnormal future profitability. Jo and Harjoto (2012) describe CSR as above-standard service to people, communities, and the environment, beyond legal requirements. Investing in reputation creates lasting differences in company performance in competitive environments (Cabral, 2012; Ioann and Hawn, 2019).

The supply chain is the network connecting a company and its suppliers, covering all activities transforming raw materials into final products (Handfield & Nichols, 1999). Optimizing supply chains reduces costs, increases profitability, speeds production, and maintains global competitiveness (Kenton, 2021). Responsible Supply Chain Management (RSCM) is integral to CSR strategies. In today's global market, enforcing socially and environmentally responsible practices across complex supply networks is difficult due to weak legislation and jurisdiction. A supply chain is fully responsible only if all entities embed CSR in their cultures. Corporations with large market shares have greater influence to ensure responsibility throughout the chain (Opijnen & Oldenziel, 2010).

### **2.2 Atributs of Implementation of CSR in Supply Chain Management and Research Questions**

The implementation of CSR is a complex, multifaceted, and time-intensive process (Steinerova & Makovski, 2008). Ideally, the foundations of CSR should permeate corporate culture in the form of socially responsible values, visions, strategies, and processes. A decisive factor in this process is leadership. Without clear commitment from top management, CSR often remains a symbolic practice rather than a strategic priority. Research highlights that responsible and transformational leadership provides vision, allocates resources, and motivates employees to adopt socially responsible behavior (Maak & Pless, 2006; Khan et al., 2018). In contrast, weak leadership or short-term profit orientation can undermine CSR implementation and lead to practices of greenwashing.

Companies that embed CSR principles into their core practices tend to act more naturally in alignment with responsible conduct. Effective CSR management within the supply chain requires the involvement of key stakeholders, whose representation should be diverse and purpose-driven. The CSR team should be composed of representatives from various company departments, working collaboratively to develop an action plan (Loskot, 2021). The successful implementation of CSR is also facilitated by the support of top management and the company's ownership (Kunz, 2012). Continuous evaluation of corporate analyses is essential, serving as the basis for the development of current action plans and transparent CSR reports (Kasparová & Kunz, 2013). The use of ethical codes is often highly effective in addressing ethical dilemmas. Desirable ethical motives, behaviors, and standards of conduct among actors in the supply chain are better regulated and monitored (Hospodarska komora, 2021). In addition to these **tools**, companies utilize various approaches to socially responsible behavior, including publications, awards, product labeling, open days, press releases, anti-corruption policies, and initiatives to educate and raise awareness among employees and customers on environmental protection (Fletcher, 2014; Steinerova, 2008). Therefore will be our 1st research question:

*Q<sub>1</sub>: What tools do fashion industry companies (FIC) use to introduce responsible practices into their business activities?*

The adoption of CSR concept offers numerous advantages that are essential for a company to maintain its position in a competitively globalized market. A significant **benefit** of CSR is its positive impact on the company's image. The practice of socially responsible behavior enhances the company's reputation, which has become increasingly important to consumers over the past decade (Catch Foundation, 2021). Economically responsible companies provide customers with high-quality, safe products and services. Beyond customer appeal, CSR makes the company more attractive to current and potential employees, investors, and business partners (Hlavacek, 2008). For some companies, socially responsible behavior has become an innovative form of promotion; however, it is crucial to distinguish this from greenwashing (Vysekalova, 2009). The environmental sector of CSR focuses on energy efficiency techniques and methods for reducing the ecological footprint, thereby

building long-term sustainability for the company. A responsible approach to environmental issues not only reduces operational costs but also positively impacts the environment (Kunz, 2012). Maintaining the CSR concept enhances the company's transparency to external stakeholders, which strengthens the company's credibility. The social dimension of CSR ensures equal employment opportunities and conditions for all workers, employee welfare, work-life balance, and the elimination of child and forced labor throughout the entire supply chain (Steinerova et al., 2008). This approach increases employee loyalty and productivity, enabling the company to attract and retain high-quality employees, investors, and business partners (CSR Compass, 2010). Within the benefits of CSR implementation will be our research question:

*Q2: What are the benefits to FIC of implementing CSR across the supply chain?*

Companies face numerous **barriers** on the path to successful CSR implementation. The globalization of the market has integrated businesses into complex and extensive supply chains, making it difficult for socially responsible companies to enforce and monitor CSR principles and standards throughout the entire chain (Opijnen & Oldenziel, 2010). A significant drawback is the high cost associated with implementing socially responsible strategies, which small businesses often cannot afford (Catch Foundation, 2021). The increasing pressure for environmentally friendly practices, combined with customers' ecological preferences, poses substantial challenges for companies that are not socially responsible. Some companies falsely claim the benefits of CSR without actual commitment—this practice is known as greenwashing (Corporate Financial Institute, 2021). Companies whose CSR strategies do not yield immediate results may fall victim to public scrutiny, which often dismisses them under the assumption of greenwashing, thereby undermining the company's history and reputation (Catch Foundation, 2021). Other obstacles to successful CSR implementation include organizational constraints, such as the influence of corporate culture, rigid hierarchical command structures, vertical division of labor, and unclear priorities, as well as unethical behavior by managers or company owners (Lohr & Steinmann, 1995). Within this problematic is a research question:

*Q3: What barriers cause complications for FIC to implement CSR across the supply chain?*

As part of our analysis, we will focus on examining the causes that are essential for understanding the entire issue of CSR implementation. The reasons that led fashion firms to implement CSR can be divided into internal or external. External causes are caused by external influences, for example in the form of public accusations or scandals. Internal causes are caused by influence from within the company. These causes provide key explanations for the reasons that led companies to implement CSR and have a direct impact on the selection and effectiveness of the tools used in CSR strategy implementation. Understanding these causes is crucial for developing a comprehensive approach to CSR and ensuring that the implementation tools effectively support long-term socially responsible behavior.

*Q4: What causes FIC to implement CSR across the supply chain?*

### **2.3 Current Situation in Global Fashion**

The textile industry's environmental pillar is increasingly challenged by the rise of *fast fashion*. Since the 1990s, shopping has become a form of entertainment, and demand for ever-changing trends is growing. Fast fashion offers affordable, trend-driven clothing via efficient supply chains linking producers and retailers. Companies like Zara, H&M, Primark, and Mango benefit from this model, gaining competitive advantage. In contrast, firms committed to environmental responsibility tend to avoid this approach (Corporate Finance Institute, 2021).

However, fast fashion has severe environmental and social consequences. Low prices and rapid trend cycles lead to massive waste: 80 billion garments are consumed annually, and 2,625 kg of clothing are discarded every second (Cervinkova, 2021). Toxic dyes and chemicals cause significant air and water pollution (Fletcher, 2014). Global shipping of garments further increases CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Fast fashion also fuels exploitative labor practices. Many garments are produced in sweatshops where workers, often including children, work up to 16 hours daily in hazardous conditions. About 93% of these facilities do not pay a living wage (Minney, 2017), with average daily earnings below €3. The COVID-19 pandemic further reduced wages by 21% (Cervinkova, 2021) and recent ILO data (2022) show that wage recovery remains slow in major textile-exporting countries. Despite these issues, the apparel industry is projected to grow from \$1.9 trillion in 2019 to \$3.3 trillion by 2030 (Statista, 2023), reflecting ongoing consumer demand.

At the policy level, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015) (e.g., SDG 12, SDG 13) provide voluntary guidance, while the EU Green Deal and the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles (2022) introduce binding measures aimed at reducing waste and extending product lifecycles. Yet, individuals can help mitigate

fast fashion's impact. Actions include reducing clothing purchases, extending garment lifespans, and recycling or upcycling. Conscious consumers can seek sustainably produced goods labeled Fair-trade, Cruelty-free, or Eco-friendly. Ultimately, meaningful change depends on informed, responsible choices (Fletcher, 2014).

### 3. Data and Method

The mentioned attributes were analyzed on a sample of companies in the fashion industry, since it poses significant global challenges. Fast fashion generates an estimated 92 million tons of textile waste annually worldwide and is expected to rise to 134 million tons per year by 2030 (Earth, 2021). The rapidly developing manufacturing process contributes to almost 10% of global carbon emissions and nearly 20% of global water consumption (UNECE, 2018). In addition to these environmental impacts, the industry is also associated with sweatshops. The implementation of CSR in the corporate activities of fashion brands can help mitigate these negative effects. The research sample consisted of the ten most valuable fashion brands in the world in 2022 (see Table 1). These rankings were compiled based on brand market value in 2020 and 2021. The criteria for including these brands in the sample included financial performance, prestige, and overall impact on the fashion industry. The research, the results of which were published in the fashion magazine *The VOU*, used data obtained from Statista.com, a trusted source of market trends and analysis. This approach allowed the researchers to obtain objective and relevant data to analyze the motivations and trends in CSR implementation in the supply chains of major fashion brands (The VOU, 2022)

**Table 1: Top 10 most valuable fashion brands in 2022. Source: Own processing based on thevou.com 2022**

Ranked	Fashion brand	Country	Market value 2020 in billion \$	Market value 2021 in billion \$
1.	NIKE	USA	34,8	30,5
2.	GUCCI	Italy	17,6	15,6
3.	Louis Vuitton	France	16,5	14,8
4.	Adidas	Germany	16,5	14,3
5.	Chanel	France	13,7	13,2
6.	ZARA	Spain	14,5	13,1
7.	UNIQLO	Japan	12,8	13,1
8.	H&M	Sweden	13,8	12,4
9.	Cartier	France	15	12
10.	Hermès	France	11,9	11,6

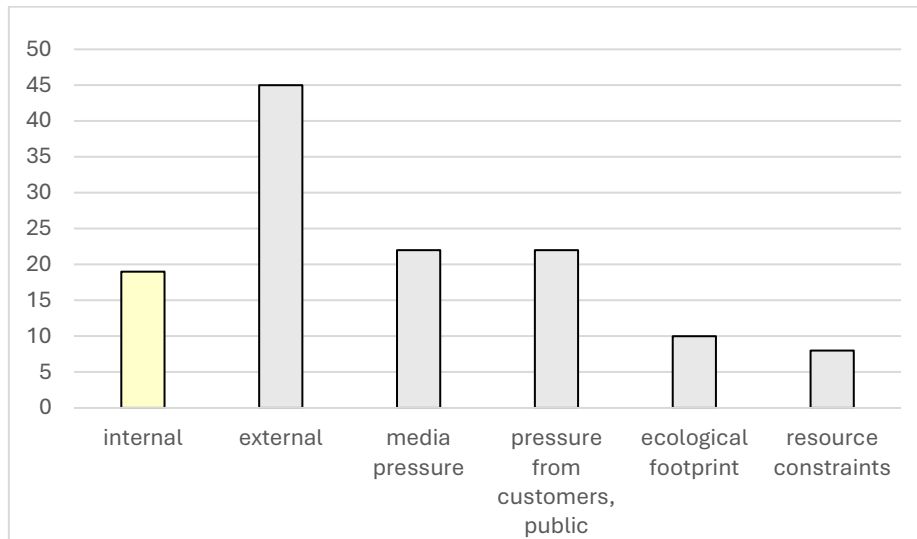
The paper is based on qualitative research that is informed by the principles of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2007). Grounded theory is characterised primarily by the interdependence of analysis and data collection. The analysis of firms is based on secondary data collected from corporate websites (Whiteside et al., 2012). Websites are a key medium in corporate communication strategies (Wheeler and Elkington, 2001) and are therefore a useful source of information. Thus, companies use their websites as a tool to communicate their sustainability, circular economy and environmental, social and governance activities (Da Giau et al., 2016). The study further uses data collection through keyword search 3 case studies, 37 articles, 10 magazines, 5 documentaries, 12 press releases including interviews and 4 books. These sources also correlate with the types of data analysed on the basis of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2007). The following terms were searched in the available sources: code of ethics, CSR report, CSR team, action plan, consumer turnaround, education and awareness, community investment, green approach, internal/external audits, solidarity behaviour, relations with international NGOs, certification/exclusivity and workforce equality. If a company in the research sample has experienced any modification of a given tool, it is indicated in the table with a cross, otherwise with a comma. Tools that were not mentioned by the companies of the research sample (indicated by a comma) were not found by the research. This finding does not necessarily mean that the companies do not use the tools, just that they were not found in the available sources.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Causes of Implementation of CSR

Figure 1 shows how external factors especially public accusations and scandals linked to fast fashion and sweatshops pressured Nike, Adidas, Zara, Uniqlo, and H&M. Media, NGOs, and consumers demanded ethical supply chains, leading to sales declines and forcing firms to respond. Nike initially denied allegations but mounting pressure in the 1990s led management to admit mistakes and reform its supply chain, aligning with Loskot's (2021) view that CSR adoption protects reputation. H&M and Uniqlo followed similar paths, while Adidas also faced internal pressure as employees left due to its reluctance to adopt CSR (Adamek, 2021).

Luxury brands such as Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Cartier, and Hermès were mainly driven by internal motives, using CSR to build exclusivity, differentiation, and reputation. Still, Gucci and Hermès customers reported CSR shaped purchasing decisions, while Chanel, LV, and Gucci faced activist pressure over animal testing and materials. Varying legal standards hinder uniform adoption. Another driver is resource scarcity and environmental damage tied to fast fashion, forcing firms to act within the environmental pillar. As MIDAS PR Group (2016) notes, firms traditionally prioritized profit. Initially, CSR was seen as an economic tool, but like Nike, more companies have recognized its broader importance. In line with stakeholder theory (Freeman, 2010), businesses should be accountable not only to shareholders but all stakeholders.



Source: Own processing

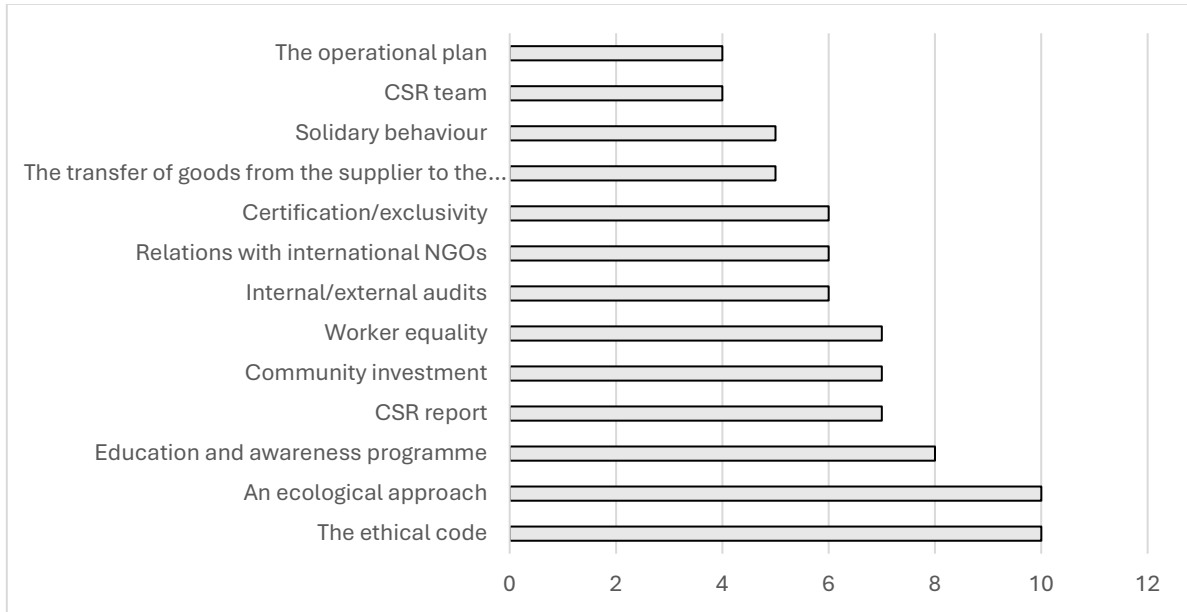
**Figure 1: Causes of implementation of CSR**

### 4.2 Tools of Implementation of CSR

The research revealed that the most common CSR tools across supply chains are code of ethics, ecological approaches, training programs, CSR reports, and community investment (see Figure 2). All surveyed companies applied these tools or their variants, confirming the Chamber of Commerce's (2021) claim that they standardize professional conduct in complex supply chains. Surprisingly, only 7 of 10 companies publish CSR reports, despite all claiming ecological approaches. This contradicts Kašparová and Kunz (2013), who argue that reports should be standard and include detailed evaluations. Many fashion reports lack supplier-level data, where the most serious issues occur; only Nike and Adidas disclosed full supplier information. CSR teams and action plans were identified in just 4 firms, suggesting that many brands prioritize public image over implementation.

The absence of CSR teams at Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Uniqlo, H&M, and Hermès is notable. For exclusive brands, this may reflect tighter supplier control and quality standards, but for fast fashion firms it undermines credibility. Ecological strategies and training programs remain widespread. These findings support Steinerová (2008), whose framework includes awards, shared marketing, and stakeholder engagement. Worker equity and community investment are applied by 7 companies; such investments strengthen vulnerable communities (Netinbag, 2022). Audits, NGO ties, and certification are used by 6 firms. Zara and Uniqlo use none, while H&M and Louis Vuitton employ only one or two, indicating reluctance to acknowledge negative impacts.

Overall, a clear pattern emerges. Luxury brands rely on controlled suppliers and traditional standards, publishing fewer reports or plans. Fast fashion emphasizes ecological claims but avoids deeper tools, while sportswear companies such as Nike and Adidas adopt the most advanced practices. Thus, CSR implementation depth is shaped by business model: exclusivity favors control, fast fashion cost and speed, and sportswear stakeholder and NGO pressure.



Source: Own processing

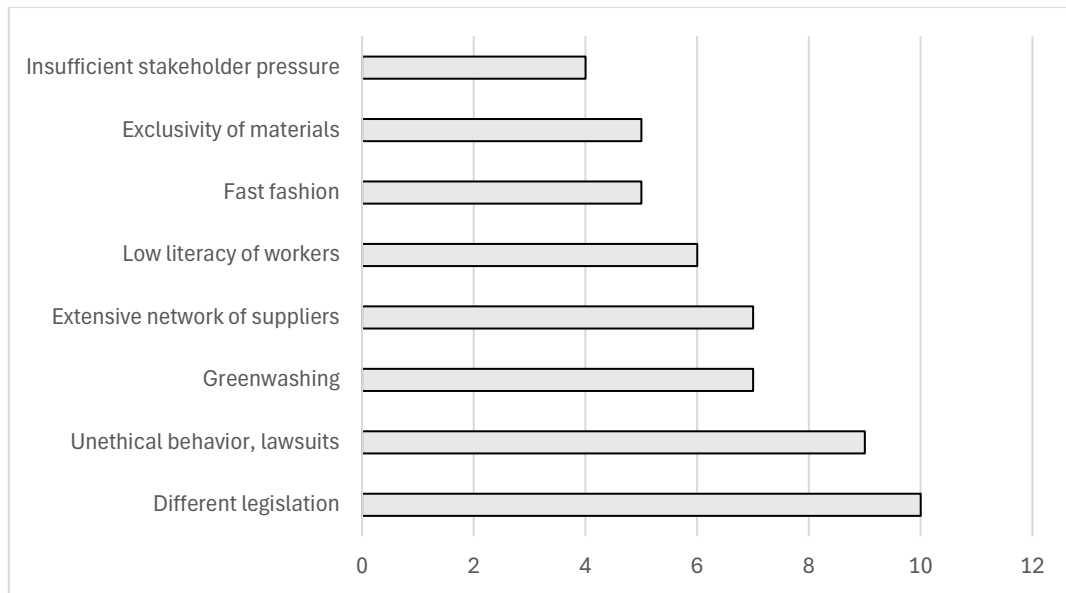
**Figure 2: Tools of implementation of CSR**

### 4.3 Barriers to CSR Implementation

Figure 3 shows that legal differences between countries are the main barrier to CSR implementation across all surveyed companies. As Hrcir and Chvosta (2021) note, contractual relations must align with legislation while allowing enforcement and minimizing disputes. This reflects a downside of globalization, where differing legal and cultural norms intersect.

Luxury brands (Gucci, LV, Chanel, Cartier, Hermès) face major CSR challenges in animal testing and sourcing, while for Nike, Adidas, Zara, Uniqlo, and H&M, environmental protection is central. Global outsourcing has produced long supplier chains and sweatshop risks, identified in 7 of 10 firms. This was not detected at LV, Cartier, and Hermès due to stricter supplier selection. Low worker literacy perpetuates poverty and weakens supplier accountability, a barrier found in 6 firms (Minney, 2017).

Fast fashion poses another barrier, confirmed for 5 firms (Cervinkova, 2021; Corporate Finance Institute, 2021; Fletcher, 2014). Constant trend demand makes reducing environmental impacts difficult; cheap production often involves toxic processes and sweatshops. Exclusive brands avoid fast fashion but face ethical criticism over animal-derived materials. Supplier misconduct also results in greenwashing: in 7 firms, CSR claims were exaggerated or misleading. No such behavior was observed at Chanel, Cartier, or Hermès. Louis Vuitton was falsely accused due to counterfeit goods, while Gucci despite claiming 100% CSR compliance in Italy relies on over 3,000 unverifiable suppliers. CSR implementation remains inconsistent due to weak stakeholder pressure. For Gucci and LV, status outweighs ethics, while H&M's shareholders, mainly Nordic banks, fail to demand standards.



Source: Own processing

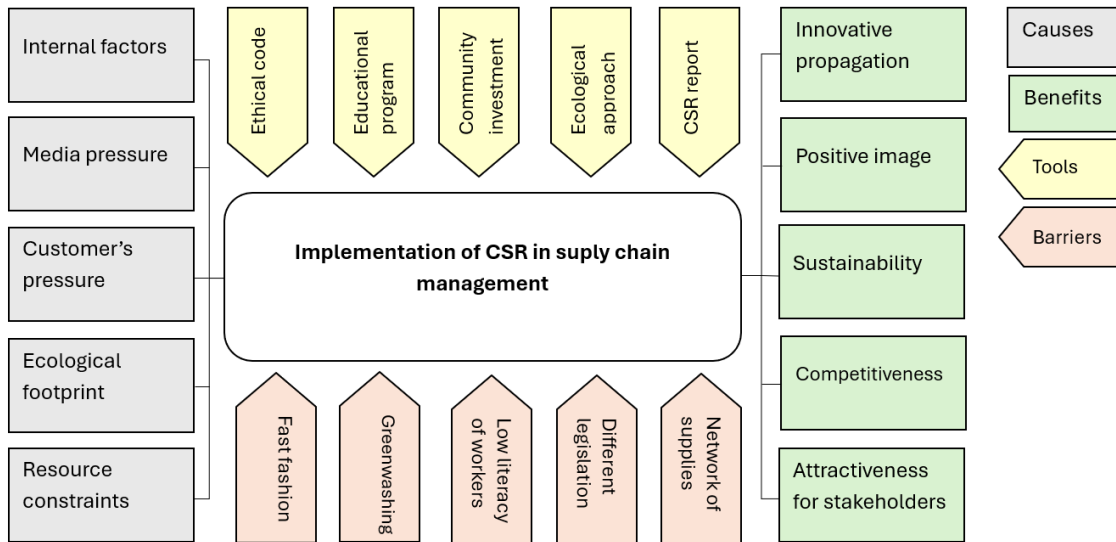
**Figure 3: Barriers of implementation of CSR**

Comparing barriers, fast fashion faces the harshest obstacles mass production, short cycles, greenwashing. Luxury brands encounter ethical controversies tied to materials and reputation. Sportswear firms face long supply chains and sweatshops but mitigate some risks through stronger stakeholder monitoring. Overall, legal fragmentation and cost pressures are universal, but other barriers vary by business model, linking CSR challenges to strategic positioning and stakeholder expectations.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

### 5.1 Summary of Findings

Figure 4 illustrates the CSR implementation process in fashion supply chains, showing motivating factors and challenges. On the left, key reasons for adopting CSR include external pressure from media, customers, and NGOs due to negative publicity around fast fashion and sweatshops. Internal pressures, such as management's aim to protect brand reputation and market position, are also important. Luxury brands focus on exclusivity and differentiation, while fast fashion companies respond mainly to public scrutiny. The right side shows benefits of CSR adoption: improved brand reputation, increased customer loyalty, and reduced risks from negative perceptions. For some, CSR also drives more sustainable and innovative practices, especially in environmental sustainability and resource management. The middle part presents common CSR tools codes of conduct, environmental approaches, training programs, and CSR reports, that help monitor compliance and promote transparency. However, the bottom section highlights major barriers: legal and regulatory differences across countries, supplier management challenges, and ongoing fast fashion demand undermining sustainability. Greenwashing was identified as a critical issue, with some companies misleading the public about their CSR efforts, limiting the effectiveness of these initiatives.



Source: Own processing

**Figure 4: Schema of CSR Implementation**

## 5.2 Implications

This study has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it contributes to CSR literature in the fashion industry, especially regarding global supply chains. It deepens understanding of internal and external factors influencing CSR and confirms that protecting corporate reputation is a key motivator. These results support stakeholder theory, which highlights a firm's responsibility to all stakeholders, not just shareholders. Practically, the findings are valuable for fashion leaders and policymakers, helping them adapt CSR strategies to address challenges like environmental sustainability and ethical labor conditions. The study also offers guidance on CSR tools such as codes of conduct, reporting, and community investment, promoting transparency and effective supply chain management. Beyond corporate action, consumer behavior plays a critical role in mitigating fast fashion's negative impact. Consumers can reduce harm by buying fewer clothes, extending garment life, or recycling through methods like reusing. Choosing sustainably produced products identified by labels such as Fair-trade, Cruelty-free, or Eco-friendly further supports positive change. Ultimately, consumer awareness of fast fashion's harms and conscious purchasing decisions are essential for transforming the industry (Fletcher, 2014). The combined effect of corporate responsibility and responsible consumer choices can foster a more sustainable and ethical fashion ecosystem.

## 5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study offers valuable insights but has limitations. It focuses on the ten most valuable fashion brands in 2022, which may not represent smaller or start-up brands that might have different CSR practices. The qualitative research relies mainly on secondary data, which can be biased or incomplete, especially regarding supply chain transparency. The complexity of multi-tiered global supply chains, especially in fast fashion, makes it difficult to obtain full and accurate data on all suppliers, so some practices may be missing. Geographic and legal differences across regions also limit how CSR is implemented and enforced. Future research should broaden the scope to include smaller, sustainable, and emerging brands with innovative CSR approaches. Longitudinal studies could track how CSR strategies evolve under changing pressures like regulations, consumer expectations, and environmental crises. Investigating new CSR tools and technologies, such as blockchain, may provide solutions for better transparency and accountability in global supply chains. Additionally, further research should examine the impact of regional legal frameworks on CSR implementation, focusing on variations in enforcement worldwide.

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**AI declaration:** AI tools (ChatGPT by OpenAI) were used to assist with the stylistic refinement and language polishing of the English text. The content and structure of the paper were entirely developed by the author.

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