

## **Sustainable Retailing in the UK: A Critical Case Study of Tesco's Environmental and Social Accountability Strategies.**

Sustainable retailing is increasingly vital in today's competitive market as consumers and regulators demand greater environmental and social accountability. Retailers must integrate sustainability into their operations, balancing corporate responsibility with financial performance. In the UK, this trend is especially evident, with leading retailers taking steps to reduce their environmental impact and promote social sustainability. Tesco PLC, the UK's largest grocery retailer with a 27.4% market share as of April 2024 (Statista, 2024), is a prime example of how a retailer can address the rising expectations for corporate responsibility while maintaining market leadership. Operating across various sectors, including groceries, clothing, and online services, Tesco faces the challenge of embedding sustainability into its strategy while navigating a fast-evolving retail landscape. This essay critically examines sustainable retailing in the UK, using Tesco as a case study to explore its sustainability initiatives. Drawing on three key frameworks—the Natural Resource-Based View (NRBV), the Triple Bottom Line (TBL), and Industry 5.0 principles—this essay assesses how effectively Tesco incorporates sustainability into its operations. It will evaluate the company's efforts in promoting a circular economy, reducing plastic waste, and transitioning to renewable energy, and analyze the extent to which these initiatives align with its broader strategic goals. Finally, the essay will consider whether Tesco's sustainability efforts provide a competitive advantage that enhances both market leadership and societal impact, while also reflecting on broader trends in sustainable retailing.

The Natural Resource-Based View (NRBV) framework, as proposed by Hart (1995), provides a critical lens through which Tesco's sustainability initiatives can be analyzed within the

context of the UK retail market. Tesco's commitment to removing one billion pieces of plastic from its products exemplifies a strategic initiative that, when viewed through the NRBV, transcends environmental responsibility by aiming to develop unique, non-replicable capabilities that offer competitive advantages. However, as Aragón-Correa and Sharma (2003) suggest, the challenge lies in whether Tesco can effectively translate these efforts into tangible market advantages. This complexity is further heightened by the intricate relationship between sustainability strategies and market performance, particularly in a competitive landscape where 80% of UK shoppers actively sought to reduce food waste in 2022 (Mintel, 2024). When compared to other UK retailers, such as Sainsbury's, which has committed to halving plastic packaging by 2025 and removed plastic bags from its produce aisles, Tesco's efforts remain notable but face stiff competition. Sainsbury's has also advanced its sustainability agenda by turning food waste into energy, further intensifying the competitive pressure (Sainsbury, 2016). For Tesco's sustainability initiatives to serve as effective differentiators, the company must strike a balance between immediate cost-saving measures and the creation of long-term value. This balance is crucial to ensure that their environmental efforts not only resonate with eco-conscious consumers but also deliver measurable business outcomes. Success will depend on the

implementation of these initiatives as well as their effective communication with stakeholders.

A deeper analysis reveals that to fully leverage the NRBV framework, Tesco must adopt a holistic approach that strategically integrates sustainability into every aspect of its operations and marketing strategy. This involves moving beyond isolated initiatives to develop unique, difficult-to-imitate capabilities that offer lasting competitive advantages. An illustrative example of this approach is Tesco's partnership with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) (2022), which aims to halve the environmental impact of the average UK shopping basket by 2030.

This ambitious initiative covers the entire value chain, from sustainable sourcing to consumer-facing efforts, such as Tesco's commitment to sourcing 100% of its cocoa from Rainforest Alliance Certified farms by 2023 and its expansion of plant-based offerings (Tesco, 2019). This multi-pronged strategy not only reduces Tesco's environmental footprint but also positions the company as a leader in sustainability, appealing to the growing segment of environmentally conscious consumers. Additionally, with over half of UK consumers (54%) indicating they would stop buying from a company if it were found to have made misleading sustainability claims (KPMG, 2022), this underscores the complexity and volatility of consumer behaviour. Tesco's strategy, therefore, must not only respond to these trends but anticipate and shape them.

Tesco's recently launched Nature Programme further underscores its commitment to creating a sustainable food system. By supporting suppliers and farmers in adopting nature-

positive practices, such as biodiversity monitoring technologies and low-carbon fertilizers, Tesco is actively shaping a more resilient and environmentally friendly supply chain. From an NRBV perspective, these initiatives signify a strategic approach that transcends mere cost savings to create meaningful competitive advantages. Tesco's focus on product stewardship and clean technology adoption, as evidenced by its commitment to sourcing 100% of its wild-caught seafood from sustainable sources (Tesco, 2024), aligns with holistic sustainable sourcing practices in retail. This approach considers the environmental, social, and economic impacts, as emphasized by Pavićević (2023). Additionally, Tesco's achievement of its goal to switch to 100% renewable electricity across UK operations by 2030—achieved ten years ahead of schedule—further reflects its significant investment in clean technologies. The company is now focusing on ensuring that most of this renewable electricity is obtained through direct sourcing. However, while these initiatives aim to create a competitive advantage, their success

hinges on comprehensive implementation and integration into Tesco's core operations and culture. Sharma and Vredenburg (1998) argue that proactive environmental strategies can lead to unique organizational capabilities, but this is contingent on these strategies being deeply embedded in the firm's operations. This raises critical questions about the consistency of Tesco's sustainability efforts across its product range and their integration into the broader organizational strategy.

The complexities of implementing sustainable practices in a competitive retail environment emphasize the need for Tesco to adopt a more strategic and nuanced approach. The high upfront costs and operational challenges associated with integrating renewable energy highlight that relying solely on existing clean technologies may not guarantee a long-term competitive edge. Ali (2024) argues that the rapidly evolving nature of energy markets and technological advancements necessitate constant innovation and adaptation. This suggests that Tesco must go beyond surface-level sustainability efforts to redefine its supply chain through the lens of sustainability. As Suchek et al. (2021) note, the success of sustainability initiatives is closely tied to innovative business models, particularly those that incorporate circular economy principles, which not only create economic value but also benefit ecological and social systems. A strategic shift towards sustainability-focused innovation could position Tesco ahead of competitors that merely adhere to industry standards. However, the real challenge lies in ensuring these initiatives are not only implemented but also deeply integrated into the company's core business operations. Their success will ultimately depend on how well they align with shifting consumer behaviours and broader market trends. While Tesco's current initiatives show a proactive approach to sustainability, its ability to generate a

sustainable competitive advantage depends on the company's capacity to continually innovate and embed these practices within its operational and marketing frameworks. This deeper integration is crucial for Tesco to maintain long-term relevance in an increasingly sustainability-driven marketplace.

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework applied to Tesco's sustainability initiatives reveals a disconnect between the company's ambitious environmental targets and their effectiveness in driving meaningful consumer behaviour change. Tesco's notable achievements—such as a 54% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and validated Science Based Targets Initiative (SBTi) commitments to achieve net zero by 2035 (Climate Action, 2023)—demonstrate a strong environmental commitment. However, these goals remain largely disconnected from consumer action. In comparison, Morrison's (2022) introduction of carbon-neutral eggs demonstrates a more consumer-centric innovation that directly engages eco-conscious shoppers, effectively tying sustainability efforts to everyday purchasing decisions. By contrast, Tesco's carbon labelling initiative, which had minimal impact on influencing customer choices (Wu et al., 2015), illustrates a missed opportunity to link environmental efforts with tangible consumer outcomes. This gap reflects a broader issue: while Tesco's targets are impressive on paper, they are not communicated in ways that motivate behavioural change at the consumer level. To stay competitive, Tesco must shift its focus from simply setting ambitious sustainability goals to implementing communication strategies that emphasize personal consumer benefits and the practical implications of sustainable shopping. Competitors like Morrisons are successfully leveraging innovative products to drive consumer engagement, while Tesco's efforts risk remaining abstract unless they are better aligned with the consumer decision-making process.

However, despite these comprehensive and validated goals, these efforts appear disconnected from consumer behaviour, as evidenced by Wu et al. (2015), who found that Tesco's carbon labelling had minimal impact on influencing sustainable purchasing decisions. This ineffectiveness suggests that Tesco's environmental strategies are insufficient in bridging the gap between corporate sustainability initiatives and consumer engagement. The lack of consumer response not only undermines the potential impact of these initiatives but also highlights a broader issue: Tesco's strategies may be more focused on enhancing corporate reputation than fostering genuine environmental change. The failure to align corporate sustainability efforts with consumer behaviour underscores a significant limitation in the practical application of the TBL framework, questioning the depth and sincerity of Tesco's environmental commitments.

Tesco's approach to the social and economic dimensions of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework reveals contradictions that raise questions about the company's genuine commitment to sustainability. The company's £892 million investment in COVID-related costs in 2020/2021, including £173 million in bonuses for frontline workers (NFU, 2021), may appear as a significant act of social responsibility. However, when viewed within the broader economic context, this action becomes more complex. The TBL framework emphasizes the need for businesses to balance financial performance with social and environmental responsibilities, yet Tesco's pandemic response complicates this balance. Despite a 7.1% increase in group sales, reaching £53.4 billion—largely driven by a 77%

surge in online sales—Tesco's profits fell by 20% to £825 million due to pandemic-related costs (Partridge and Butler, 2021). This disparity between increased sales and falling profits raises concerns about whether Tesco's social initiatives were genuinely aimed at supporting employees or were reactive measures designed to protect the company's public image amid financial pressures. As Santoso et al. (2023) note, during crises, companies frequently implement welfare policies that not only boost employee morale but also contribute to overall performance. The significant rise in online sales likely alleviated some of Tesco's financial burdens, suggesting that the company's social initiatives might have been more opportunistic than a genuine effort to balance economic and social responsibilities. This further implies that Tesco's actions during the pandemic were more reactive to external pressures than reflective of a sustained commitment to socially responsible business practices.

Further scrutiny is warranted when evaluating Tesco's repayment of £535 million in business rate relief following pressure from investors and the public (Partridge and Butler, 2021). The decision to repay this relief—only after intense scrutiny—raises doubts about the authenticity of Tesco's ethical positioning. The continuation of dividend payouts to shareholders, even during the pandemic, suggests a prioritization of shareholder value that conflicts with the company's stated social values. This behaviour reflects a broader trend in corporate governance, where short-term financial imperatives often overshadow long-term social commitments (Sheehy & Farneti, 2021). The tension within Tesco's business model



is apparent, as immediate financial goals appear to take precedence over sustainable social initiatives. The reliance on external pressure to initiate socially responsible actions, alongside a clear emphasis on profitability, suggests that Tesco's commitment to the Triple Bottom Line

(TBL) framework may be more superficial than substantive. While the pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains and shifts in consumer behaviour, it also highlighted the limitations of applying the TBL framework to large corporations like Tesco, where growth and market share are prioritized. The fundamental question remains: can a company driven primarily by profit genuinely embed sustainability into its core business model? Tesco's actions indicate that, while some progress has been made, its commitment to sustainability is more a response to external pressures than an intrinsic, long-term strategy.

Tesco's adoption of circular economy principles, including its partnership with Loop, signals a commitment to sustainability. However, compared to M&S's Shwopping campaign, Tesco's efforts lack the same level of consumer engagement. M&S's Shwopping, part of its Plan A sustainability initiative, encourages customers to donate pre-loved clothing at in-store Shwop boxes, with the items being resold by Oxfam or repurposed. M&S further incentivizes participation by offering consumers a 20% discount on kids' daywear, thereby aligning sustainability efforts with consumer benefits (M&S, n.d.). This approach creates a more integrated experience for customers, where recycling is tied to tangible rewards and a wider social cause. In contrast, Tesco's recycling initiatives

do not provide the same level of direct consumer engagement or rewards, which limits their ability to drive widespread behavioural change. Additionally, operational challenges within Tesco's sustainability strategy weaken its impact. The recent food waste scandal, which forced Tesco to revise its food waste reduction figures from 45% to 18% (Butler, 2024), highlights issues of inadequate infrastructure and internal oversight. This incident undermines Tesco's credibility and raises questions about the transparency of its environmental claims. By contrast, M&S's circular economy efforts,

combined with incentives and a strong social narrative, present a more cohesive strategy that resonates with consumers on multiple levels. To compete effectively, Tesco must move beyond a transactional approach by integrating stronger consumer incentives, similar to M&S's Shwopping discounts, and improving internal processes to ensure its sustainability efforts deliver measurable, transparent outcomes (Khan et al., 2020).

The scandal underscores a deeper, systemic issue: Tesco's sustainability efforts seem reactive and superficial, lacking the comprehensive integration needed for meaningful transformation. Rather than embedding sustainable principles deeply within its own operations, Tesco's reliance on external partners and consumer behaviour suggests a strategy more focused on appearance than on creating substantive change. Without addressing these core issues, Tesco's circular economy initiatives risk being perceived as greenwashing—using sustainability as a marketing tool rather than demonstrating genuine commitment. This is especially troubling given the growing consumer awareness around greenwashing, where misleading claims about environmental practices can significantly

harm a company's credibility and market standing (Sanchez-González et al., 2020). This situation highlights the urgent need for Tesco to overhaul its approach, ensuring that sustainability becomes a central, integrated element of its business strategy. Failure to do so will only widen the gap between the company's ambitious claims and its actual impact, ultimately undermining its credibility and long-term viability in an increasingly sustainability-conscious market.

Moreover, Tesco's marketing strategies, such as the "Little Helps Plan" campaign, indicate a recognition of the growing consumer demand for sustainability. However, the limited success of initiatives like carbon footprint labels on dairy products suggests that these efforts may be

more about meeting consumer expectations than driving genuine behavioural change. While White et al. (2019) argue that effective communication of environmental and social benefits can influence consumer choices, the reality for Tesco is more complex. The failure of previous initiatives to significantly alter purchasing behaviour points to a deeper issue: the persistence of consumer preferences for convenience and affordability over sustainability. This indicates that retailer marketing strategies may be insufficient in addressing the underlying barriers to sustainable consumer behaviour. To be effective, Tesco must not only inform consumers but also make sustainable choices more accessible and appealing, requiring a fundamental shift in both marketing and operational strategies. The challenge lies in moving beyond surface-level marketing and creating an environment

where sustainable choices are the norm rather than the exception, a task that requires continuous innovation and a deeper commitment to aligning business practices with sustainability goals.

The integration of Industry 5.0 principles into Tesco's operations presents significant potential but also underscores several challenges that may hinder progress in achieving true sustainability. While Industry 5.0 emphasizes the fusion of human-centric approaches with advanced technologies, it demands not only technological upgrades but also a fundamental cultural shift within organizations (Grumadaitė and Jucevičius, 2022). Tesco's current sustainability efforts, including its partnership with WWF, have made gradual improvements. However, these initiatives may fall short of meeting the broader goals of Industry 5.0, which call for deeper, systemic transformation (Youssef & Mejri, 2023). Though commendable, such incremental progress raises concerns about Tesco's readiness to adopt a cohesive strategy that fully embraces the human-centric ethos of Industry 5.0.

For example, Tesco's decision to close food counters in 90 stores, affecting 9,000 employees (BBC, 2019), illustrates the tension between cost-cutting measures and the long-term social and employee well-being that Industry 5.0 prioritizes. These decisions, driven by economic pressures, risk undermining the company's sustainability commitments, potentially eroding both employee morale and community trust—essential components of building a resilient workforce and fostering consumer loyalty. This highlights a broader challenge: Tesco's struggle to balance immediate economic priorities with the forward-looking vision necessary for successful Industry 5.0 integration. To truly capitalize on Industry 5.0, Tesco must shift from reactive cost-saving measures to a more

integrated, strategic approach, embedding values like collaboration, innovation, and stakeholder well-being throughout its operations. Without this, Tesco risks reducing Industry 5.0 to isolated initiatives, rather than utilizing it as a transformative framework capable of delivering long-term sustainability and meaningful impact.

In conclusion, Tesco has made notable progress in its sustainability efforts, focusing on environmental initiatives such as reducing plastic waste, transitioning to renewable energy, and promoting circular economy practices. These actions reflect the company's growing recognition of its responsibility toward sustainability. However, despite these positive steps, Tesco's approach remains largely incremental and fragmented, lacking the full integration needed to create a truly transformative sustainability strategy. While it has addressed some environmental concerns, there is room for improvement in aligning its sustainability goals with both its business strategy and consumer expectations. The challenge remains in how Tesco can balance its long-term environmental objectives with the pressures of maintaining market leadership in a competitive and fast-evolving retail landscape.

While Tesco has made significant strides in sustainability, such as reducing plastic waste and transitioning to renewable energy, its efforts are often seen as incremental rather than transformative. To fully leverage sustainability as a competitive advantage, Tesco should focus on embedding sustainability into its marketing strategy to better resonate with consumers. For example, instead of merely promoting its use of renewable energy in stores, Tesco could develop a dedicated sustainability campaign that highlights the company's role in addressing environmental challenges across its entire value chain. This

could be done through storytelling that showcases partnerships with sustainable suppliers, emphasizing Tesco's commitment to ethical sourcing and fair trade. Using platforms like TikTok and Instagram, Tesco could amplify user-generated content from eco-conscious customers, creating a community-driven conversation around sustainability that strengthens brand loyalty.

Moreover, Tesco could benefit from segmenting its customer base to target eco-conscious consumers more effectively. Using data analytics, Tesco could identify customers who are more likely to make sustainable choices and personalize their shopping experience through tailored promotions. For instance, a dedicated "Eco-Savers" loyalty program could offer rewards and discounts on sustainable products, such as plant-based foods or biodegradable household items, encouraging more customers to engage with the brand's sustainability goals. In addition, Tesco could create sustainability product labels that offer easy-to-understand information on a product's environmental and social impact, similar to its past carbon labelling initiative but with stronger marketing integration. These labels could be coupled with educational campaigns to help consumers make informed choices, positioning Tesco as a transparent and responsible retailer.

To further enhance its market leadership, Tesco should expand its use of sustainability-driven partnerships as a marketing tool. By collaborating with well-known environmental organizations, Tesco could co-create campaigns that demonstrate real-world impact, such as initiatives to reduce food waste or improve supply chain transparency. These partnerships would not only strengthen Tesco's brand credibility but also allow the

company to tap into new consumer segments that prioritize sustainability. Through these integrated marketing strategies, Tesco can transform sustainability from a corporate responsibility initiative into a core driver of customer engagement and long-term brand loyalty, solidifying its position as a leader in sustainable retailing.

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