Sustainable Supply Chain and Design Optimization: A Bibliometric Review

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Abstract

Background: Global supply chains face unprecedented disruptions, environmental pressures, and evolving market demands, necessitating a critical transformation toward sustainability and resilience. Academic research on Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM) has consequently grown exponentially, creating a vast and multidisciplinary body of literature that requires consolidation to identify core intellectual trends and future directions.

Objective: This study aimed to conduct an extensive bibliometric analysis to map the intellectual structure and thematic evolution of SSCM research from 2021 to 2025, with a

specific focus on the intersections of green logistics, design optimization, the circular economy, and supply chain resilience.

Methods: A quantitative bibliometric methodology was employed. Data was collected from the Dimensions.ai database for Open Access journal articles published between 2021 and 2025, using a targeted search query. The analysis involved performance indicators (e.g., publication growth, influential journals) and science mapping. Network visualizations of keyword co-occurrence and bibliographic coupling were created using VOSviewer, complemented by textual analysis of titles via WordSift.org.

Findings: The analysis reveals a near-exponential growth in publications, from 28 in 2021 to 158 in 2025. The field exhibits a dual publication ecosystem, with high-volume outlets like *Sustainability* facilitating broad dissemination and high-impact journals like the *Journal of Cleaner Production* setting academic benchmarks. Thematic clusters center on technology-enabled resilience (e.g., AI, blockchain, digital twins) and circular economy integration. A striking finding is the definitive pivot toward digitalization (AI, IoT, blockchain) as the central enabler for achieving sustainability and resilience goals. Furthermore, the research community shows strong cohesion, as indicated by very high bibliographic coupling strength, suggesting a mature but potentially insular knowledge base.

Conclusion: The SSCM field has rapidly evolved from a conceptual foundation into a complex, technology-driven research arena focused on systemic resilience and circularity. The convergence of digital intelligence with sustainability imperatives is forging a new paradigm for adaptive and transparent supply networks. Future research must address the gap between high-impact theory and practical implementation, consciously foster interdisciplinary innovation to avoid intellectual insularity, and develop strategies scalable for small and medium-sized enterprises and emerging economies.

Novelty: This study provides a unique and focused temporal analysis (2021-2025) that captures the accelerated evolution of the SSCM field in the post-pandemic era. Its novelty lies in synthesizing performance analysis with advanced network visualizations to define a dynamic research agenda, rigorously documenting the crucial shift where digital intelligence is no longer a supportive tool but the key enabler of sustainable and resilient supply chains.

Keywords: Sustainable Supply Chain; Bibliometric Analysis; Green Logistics; Circular Economy; Digitalization

Introduction

The world is witnessing an unprecedented metamorphosis in the overall economic scenario, and it is being dictated by the dual drivers of environmental sustainability and operational resiliency. In recent history, supply chains have been subjected to unprecedented stressors, including the impact of the "COVID-19" pandemic and geopolitical tensions, as well as the increasingly critical drivers of climate change legislation and resource depletion (Setyadi et al., 2025). This has resulted in an overall shift in the strategic direction of organizations across the world, transforming sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) from an "add-on"

corporate social responsibility objective to an overall driver of organizational competitive and survival advantages. The amalgamation of green supply chain management and resiliency through design optimization has become an important research and practice arena.

In this context, academic research on SSCM has grown exponentially and explored various facets of SSCM. Some of the key areas of research are focused on exploring opportunities for applying cutting-edge technology like artificial intelligence and blockchain technology for SSCM, exploring opportunities for creating a circular economy, and creating a network that is robust enough to withstand shocks. However, a major challenge arising out of this exponential growth of research is that it is now too vast and multidisciplinary, including operations management, environmental sciences, economics, and information technology. It is now difficult to identify intellectual trends and directions that are common across research literature and pinpoint areas where there is a consensus on key theories and areas where research is most impactful. Consolidating this evolving area of research is a task of utmost urgency.

In an effort to fill this information gap, the current study utilizes a quantitative bibliometric study to trace and integrate the intellectual profile of SSCM studies from 2021 to 2025. Bibliometric studies, it has been argued, can be a very useful tool for the objective analysis of a significant body of literature, which might not be easily captured with other approaches (Aksnes et al., 2019). By zeroing in on the intersection of "sustainable supply chain" or "green logistics" with "design optimization," "circular economy," and "supply chain resilience," the current study seeks to examine the very core of the strategic evolution of SSCM as a field of study in the current era.

The main objectives of this manuscript may be quantitatively described as follows: first, to quantitatively assess the performance and development path of SSCM literature, including the most productive and influential publications, authors, and geographic locations; second, to visually and interpretatively reveal the intellectual structure and thematic interrelations within SSCM literature, including the use of keywords and bibliographic couplings; and last, to reveal the temporal evolution of research themes, including the distinction between traditional and newly emerging research themes with high development potential. The results may help scholars understand the research landscape and practitioners understand evidence-based research trends for the future direction of sustainable and resilient supply chain operations.

Methodology

Research Design and Data Acquisition Strategy: This research applies descriptive and diagnostic bibliometrics to examine the intellectual structure and thematic evolution of sustainable supply chain management research. This quantitative research endeavors to accomplish an objective analysis of patterns, authors, and trends in the body of knowledge. The data acquisition process was carried out by employing the Dimensions.ai tool, which has been selected owing to its extensive coverage of publications from diverse sources, such as journals, conferences, and preprints. The search query has been defined precisely to capture publications on the intersection of concepts by employing the following search terms: ("sustainable supply

chain" OR "green logistics") AND ("design optimization" OR "circular economy" OR "supply chain resilience"). The search results have been filtered to capture only Open Access journal articles published between 2021 and 2025 to ensure an analysis of contemporary knowledge. The search results have been preprocessed by eliminating duplicates and publications with incomplete bibliographic details.

Bibliometric Performance Analysis and Science Mapping: In the analysis of the field of research using the bibliometric approach, it can be observed that the analysis takes place in two ways: performance analysis and science mapping. In the performance analysis, the productivity and success of the field of research are measured by making use of various parameters, which are commonly used in the field of bibliometrics. These parameters include the annual growth rate of the publications, the authors who are contributing to the field of research in the highest number of publications, the institutions to which these authors belong, the source of the journals in which the publications are made according to Bradford's Law, geographical distribution of the research, and the citations made by the authors, including the total number of citations and the citation impact per publication.

Network Construction and Thematic Analysis Using VOSviewer: The core of science mapping is performed by VOSviewer software, which is specialized in constructing and displaying bibliometric networks. Using the cleaned data set, a co-occurrence network of author keywords is constructed. The clustering function of VOSviewer software is used to frequently co-occurring keywords to identify specific thematic clusters, each of which is depicted by a unique color on the network map. The interpretation of these clusters is that they signify specific research fronts of particular time periods. For example, a research front can be created by connecting keywords such as "circular economy" and "remanufacturing," while another research front can be created by connecting keywords such as "resilience" and "digital twin." Furthermore, an overlay network is also created by VOSviewer software, in which each node is depicted by a specific color representing the average year of publication. This network visually illustrates the evolution of research topics over time by separating old research topics such as "green logistics" from new research topics such as "AI for decarbonization."

Textual Analysis and Synthesis of Quantitative Outcomes: In an attempt to complement the outcomes of the network analysis, an initial graphical insight into the key trends revealed by the literature will be achieved through the textual analysis tool WordSift.org. The titles of all the literature studies included in the database will be analyzed in order to produce a word cloud, where the size of the word is proportional to the frequency of the word. Lastly, the outcomes of all the quantitative methods, including the performance indicators, the VOSviewer network maps, and the word frequency analysis, will be synthesized in order to produce a comprehensive interpretation of the research environment, not only pointing out the key trends revealed by the literature but also how these trends are interlinked and how they evolve over the five-year period between 2021 and 2025.

Results and Analysis
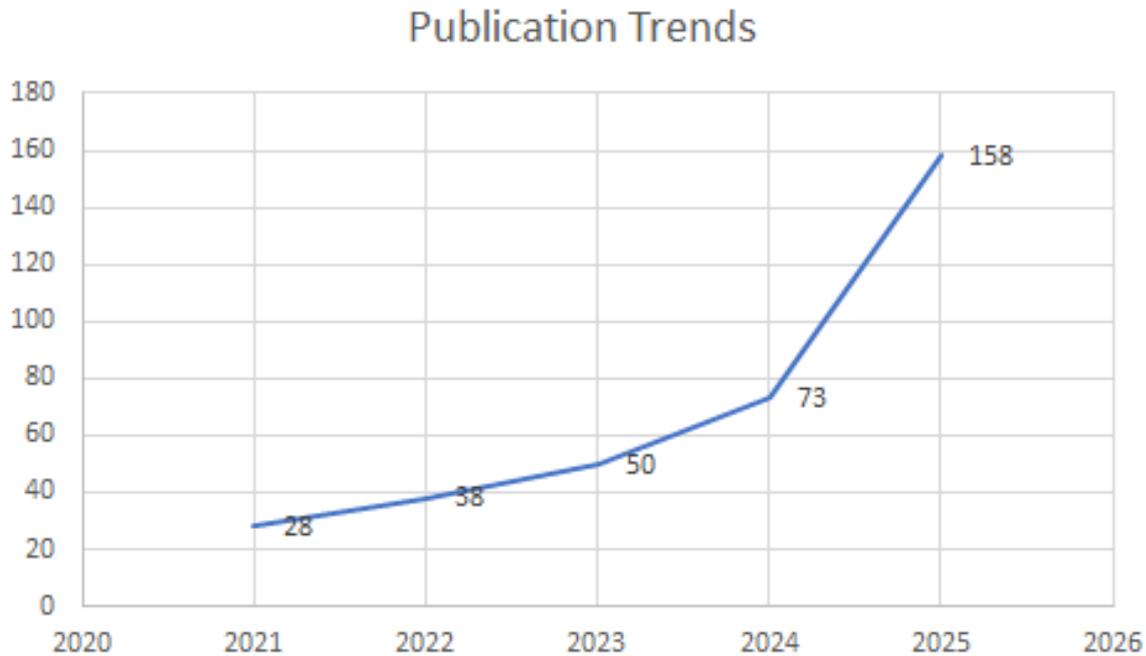**Publication Trends**

Figure 1: Publication Trends

As depicted in the line graph, there was a sharp and steep increase in research on the subject over the years. The research publications were only 28 in 2021, but then the numbers started to increase to 38 in 2022, followed by 50 in 2023. The highest jump was recorded in 2024, with the research publications almost tripling those in 2021 to reach 73. Therefore, it is safe to say that the subject has gained much more importance and popularity in a very short period of time. This tells us that the subject has gained much more popularity and has become a major focus area for researchers. The sharp jump to 158 in 2025 indicates that the subject has gained much more attention from researchers, universities, and companies alike. They are probably responding to the issues of climate change, delayed cargo ships, and the implementation of new environmental laws (Setyadi et al., 2025). The numbers are still increasing very steeply, indicating that much more research and ideas on green and efficient supply chains are to be expected in the near future.

Table 1: Source of Titles (Top 10 Journals based on no. of publications)

Journals	No of Publications	Citations	Citation mean
Sustainability	43	897	20.86
Business Strategy and the Environment	9	693	77
Journal of Cleaner Production	6	903	150.5
Discover Sustainability	5	33	6.6
Cleaner Logistics and Supply Chain	5	166	33.2
Operations Management Research	5	127	25.4
Sustainable Development	5	12	2.4
Annals of Operations Research	4	84	21
Energies	4	43	10.75
E3S Web of Conferences	4	4	1.25

The journals listed here indicate a clear thematic fit with the sub-theme of sustainable supply chain systems and design optimization, yet they also indicate a clear hierarchy of scholarly influence and reach. *Sustainability* has by far the greatest number of publications at 43, which is understandable given its broad scope and open-access nature, which will naturally attract a variety of publications on sustainability in terms of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. However, it also has a lower citation mean at 20.86 compared to other journals, suggesting while it is an important channel for disseminating research, it has a lower impact per publication. In contrast, Journal of *Cleaner Production* has an exceptionally high citation mean at 150.5, yet it has published only six articles, suggesting it is an elite journal in terms of supply chain optimization research, as it deals with sustainable production and circular economy concepts. This journal's performance suggests it is an important journal in terms of publishing seminal works in the field.

An in-depth look into the journals reveals that some are of high impact and specialized in nature, whereas others are of broader scope and have a higher output. For instance, Business Strategy and the *Environment and Journal of Cleaner Production* are the highest in terms of impact factor per article, as they are focused on strategic environmental management and sustainability operations, which are critical areas of study in the context of sustainable supply chain management. On the other hand, newer or niche journals such as *Cleaner Logistics and Supply Chain* and *Operations Management Research* are moderate in terms of impact but are performing well in terms of impact factor (33.2 and 25.4, respectively), indicating that these are becoming important topic-specific journals. Journals such as *Discover Sustainability* and *E3S Web of Conferences* have lower impact factor scores, which may be attributed to the fact that *Discover Sustainability* is a relatively newer journal and the latter is a conference proceedings journal that attracts shorter-term citations.

The presence of established impact factor journals such as *Journal of Cleaner Production* and open-access, high-volume journals such as *Sustainability* or *Energies* implies a dual approach to disseminating research in sustainable supply chains. That is, researchers can focus on achieving the greatest impact through established impact factor journals such as *Journal of Cleaner Production*, while ensuring rapid publication through open-access journals such as *Sustainability* or *Energies*. This is consistent with the applied, critical nature of research in sustainable supply chains, where high-impact factor research is highly valued alongside rapid dissemination of research results. The presence of *Annals of Operations Research* implies a focus on quantitative research in supply chains.

Thus, this journal portfolio suggests an active and growing research field in which sustainable supply chain and design optimization is well-represented in both specialized and general journals in the field of sustainability (Johnson et al., 2025; Sarkis & Ibrahim, 2022). The high number of top journals in terms of citation means also suggests that this topic has significant research potential in terms of academic outreach (Wang & Feng, 2024). For bibliometric research, this suggests that in addition to publication quantity, publication tier and concentration should also be taken into consideration when examining the intellectual structure of this research field. Future trends could also include an increase in specialized logistics and

operations journals, as well as an increase in these journals' inclusion of topics such as digitalization, resilience, and circularity.

Word Cloud: Keywords from Research Titles

Figure 2: Keywords from Research Titles

The word cloud of keywords from the title of the research shows that sustainable, supply, and chain are the most frequently used large words. This makes complete sense, as the topic of the research is sustainable supply chains. Other large words such as management, industry, economy, green, etc., tell me that this research is not just about the environment. This research ties into business, industry, and the economy. The emphasis on sustainability and green ideas means that saving the planet is a big part of this entire area of research (Acharya et al., 2024). We also see important words like pandemic, crisis, and food. This is a story about recent world crises. The world crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic created significant challenges for global supply chains, especially for supplying food and medicine. The research in this area is directly responding to a world crisis. Scientists and businesses are conducting research on making global supply chains more robust so they do not break during the next crisis. The word food is also highlighted as a significant issue for a sustainable world.

These words include technology-related terms such as digital, artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), blockchain, and IoT (Internet of Things). This is an incredibly important finding. It suggests that not only do supply chains need to be improved and made more green, but also that this improvement and greenification need to be done through technology. Researchers are exploring how AI can be used to better plan routes for deliveries, how blockchain can be used to track products to make sure they are produced ethically, and

how IoT can be used to reduce waste. The future of supply chains is digital and intelligent (Wu et al., 2025).

Finally, words such as circular, carbon, and logistics suggest a set of solutions. A circular economy is one that reuses and recycles materials, rather than discarding them (Zink & Geyer, 2017). Reducing carbon emissions is a key strategy in the fight against global warming (Singh et al., 2025). And logistics refers to the practical aspects of moving things from one place to another. The word cloud tells us that the current research in supply chains is a combination of big concepts such as sustainability and circular economies, and practical tools such as AI and logistics, all working together to create a system that is good for business, good for society, and good for the environment all at the same time.

Co-authorship
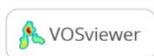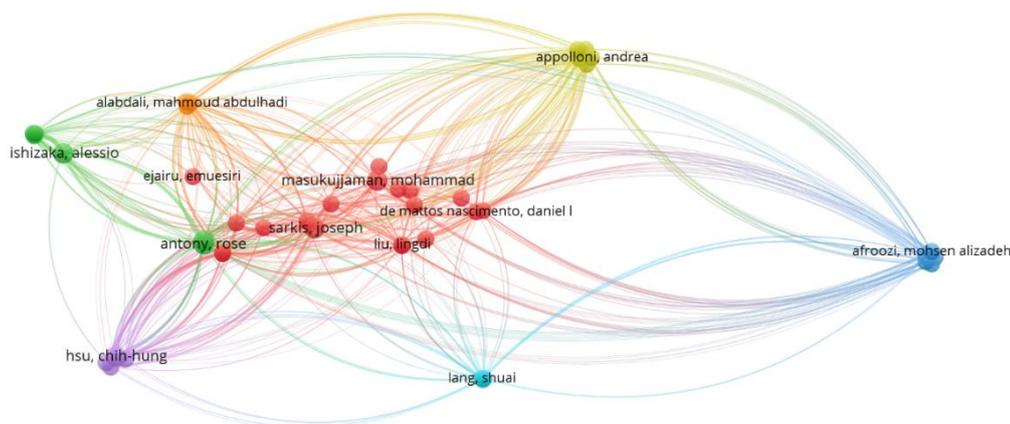
The networks visualization shows the results of a bibliographic coupling analysis, and it is evident from the graph that all the authors have 100% coupling strength, meaning their research articles have shared references with the foundational or most influential research in the field they specialize in. Bibliographic coupling is an analysis of the common references shared among research articles (Mahat et al., 2024; Neupane & Lourdusamy, 2024). When many authors have 100%, it means they have a strong and unified foundational knowledge in the field they specialize in.

This high degree of similarity is noteworthy. It implies that the research in the field of sustainable supply chain and design optimization, particularly this data set, is based upon a very narrow set of key research pieces, theories, or models. It is likely that researchers such as Joseph Sarkis, an important contributor to the field of sustainable operations management, or Alessio Ishizaka, who has made important contributions to the field of multi-criteria decision-making methods, are part of this set. The fact that many researchers are citing the same set of

key research pieces implies that the field has an established knowledge base from which most research emerges (Aksnes et al., 2019).

From a positive point of view, this high value of coupling strength reflects a high level of cohesion and focus (Jin et al., 2022). The research community is united. The research is about solving similar problems with similar concepts and frameworks. This is good for new entrants to the research area and also for specialists who can build on each other's research. It is a sign of a mature research area, as it has moved beyond its early disorganized stage and reached a consensus on key central ideas. However, one possible risk with such high uniformity is the lack of diversity in thought. If everyone is reading and referencing the same small set of seminal research, there is a risk for "groupthink." The field could also become insular, potentially missing new and innovative ideas coming from other, less connected fields. It could also mean that important and different ideas are being ignored, and this would slow down any revolutionary progress. A healthy field has both strong central themes and exploratory branches.

Network Visualization of Countries
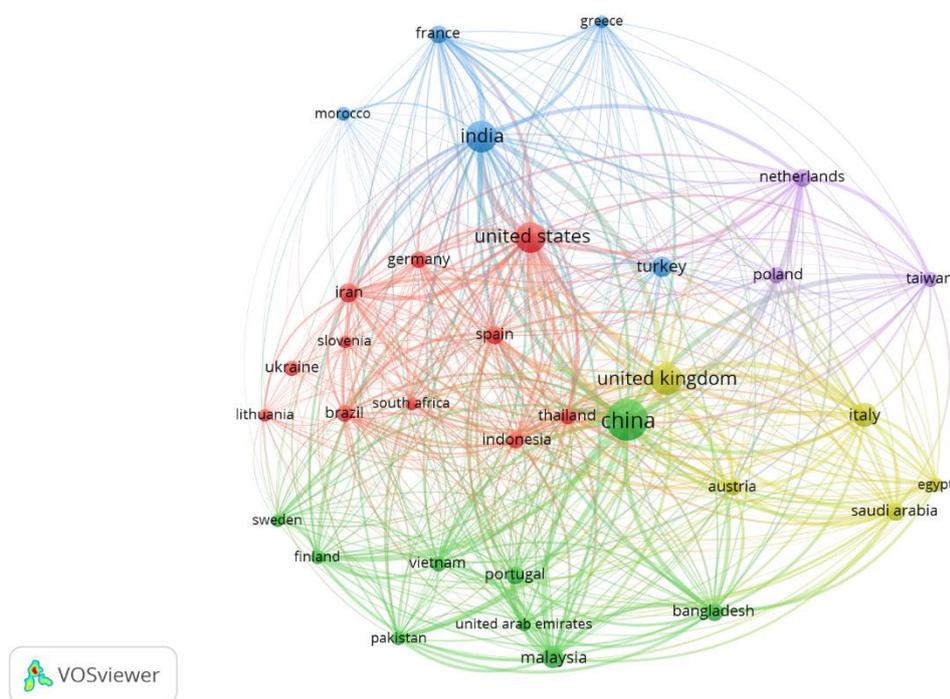
The bibliometric coupling map provides a representation of the international research community on sustainable supply chain and design optimization by highlighting the linkages between countries in terms of collaboration and citation. The size of the nodes in the map represents research output and impact, and the density of the links represents the intensity of research connections. The map shows that the international research community on sustainable supply chain and design optimization is highly interconnected with a few dominant countries, indicating that knowledge production is concentrated rather than being evenly distributed.

The United States, China, the United Kingdom, and India appear as key nodes in this body of research. These nations demonstrate strong bibliographic coupling with various regions, which signifies a large number of publications and intense citation patterns across nations. The prominence of these nations can be attributed to their heavy investment in sustainability research, advanced industrial supply chains, and strong academic-industry networks. European nations like Germany, France, Italy, and the Netherlands also form a crucial part of this body of research and are strongly interconnected, with a focus on optimization models, circular economy, and green logistics.

Some of the emerging nations, such as Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Indonesia, and South Africa, are also visible, especially in the green and yellow regions. Their presence indicates a growing interest in research, which is a result of the expansion of manufacturing sectors and the sustainability challenge. Nevertheless, despite the progress, the size of their nodes is smaller and less central compared to developed nations.

One of the most interesting observations that can be made from the map is the absence of Nepal as a contributing country. Unlike other countries in the region such as India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, as well as smaller economies that are part of the global economy and thus the global supply chain, Nepal is not part of the bibliometric map. This is an indication of a research gap and thus little research output.

This difference reveals a significant opportunity for Nepalese researchers and institutions. Considering the vulnerability of Nepal to climate change, its import-dependent supply chain, and the increasing focus on sustainable development, the lack of research engagement is a strategic missed opportunity. Building academic strength, encouraging interdisciplinary research, and facilitating international collaborations could help Nepal join this international research community. This discrepancy is not only an opportunity to improve academic presence but also to facilitate research-informed policies and sustainable industrial development according to international sustainability objectives.

Conclusion

This bibliometric analysis provides a definitive, data-driven overview of the Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM) field from 2021 to 2025. The results confirm its rapid maturation from a specialized topic into a critical, mainstream domain of academic and practical inquiry, as evidenced by the near-exponential growth in publications. The intellectual structure is characterized by a strong, cohesive core of foundational literature, which has facilitated focused progress but also presents a risk of intellectual insularity. The most significant thematic shift identified is the definitive pivot toward digitalization and intelligent technologies—such as artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, and the Internet of Things (IoT)—as central enablers of sustainability and resilience. This shift represents a paradigm change from asking *why* supply chains must be sustainable to solving *how* through smart, data-driven systems. Concurrently, the heightened focus on crisis management and resilience reflects the field's direct response to recent global disruptions, integrating risk

mitigation into the core sustainability agenda. The convergence of digital tools and resilience thinking is forging a new research frontier dedicated to creating adaptive, transparent, and self-optimizing supply networks that are robust enough to withstand future shocks while minimizing environmental impact.

Recommendations

To build upon the findings of this study and guide the future evolution of the SSCM field, the following actionable recommendations are proposed for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers:

1. Foster Interdisciplinary and Geographically Diverse Research Collaborations

- Action: Actively seek partnerships beyond traditional operations management and environmental science. Integrate perspectives from data science, behavioral economics, complex systems theory, and political ecology to challenge established assumptions and foster breakthrough innovations.
- Rationale: The observed high bibliographic coupling strength indicates a mature but potentially closed knowledge network. Cross-disciplinary collaboration is essential to inject novel methodologies and paradigms, preventing groupthink and accelerating revolutionary progress.
- Specific Initiative: Funding bodies and journal special issues should prioritize research that explicitly bridges SSCM with fields like digital ethics, consumer psychology, or geopolitical risk analysis.

2. Bridge the "Implementation Gap" Between Theory and Practice

- Action: Shift significant research focus toward developing scalable, pragmatic frameworks and tools tailored for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and specific industrial contexts (e.g., food, pharmaceuticals, textiles).
- Rationale: While advanced optimization models and conceptual frameworks abound, their practical application, especially for resource-constrained organizations, remains a critical barrier. The field's impact will be measured by its tangible contribution to on-the-ground transformation.
- Specific Initiative: Encourage and publish more case-study research, pilot project analyses, and development of open-access toolkits that lower the barrier to adopting SSCM and digital technologies.

3. Prioritize Research in and for Under-Represented and Vulnerable Regions

- Action: Develop targeted research programs and international collaborations focused on the unique SSCM challenges and opportunities in regions like Nepal, which were absent from the current bibliometric map, as well as other developing economies.
- Rationale: Climate-vulnerable and import-dependent economies stand to benefit enormously from sustainable and resilient supply chains but are currently underrepresented in the global research discourse. Inclusive knowledge production is vital for global equity and effectiveness.

- Specific Initiative: Establish academic partnerships, sponsor doctoral research, and host regional workshops to build local research capacity and co-create solutions that address context-specific challenges such as infrastructure limitations and informal economies.

4. Deepen Inquiry into the Governance and Ethics of Digital SSCM

- Action: Proactively investigate the socio-technical implications of pervasive digitalization, including data privacy, algorithmic bias, cybersecurity risks, and the distribution of value and power within blockchain-enabled networks.
- Rationale: As digital intelligence becomes the "key enabler," its ethical and governance frameworks must be a core research theme, not an afterthought. Uncritical adoption could lead to new forms of risk and inequality.
- Specific Initiative: Dedicate research streams to develop principles for "responsible digitalization" in SSCM, auditing tools for AI fairness in logistics, and models for inclusive data governance in supply chain platforms.

5. Develop Integrated Metrics for Synergistic Performance

- Action: Create and validate new multi-dimensional metrics and decision-support systems that quantitatively evaluate the synergistic performance of supply chains across sustainability (carbon, circularity), resilience (recovery time, adaptability), and digital maturity (data quality, connectivity).
- Rationale: Current metrics often treat these goals in isolation. Future systems require integrated scorecards that help managers optimize for the triple win of environmental, operational, and digital objectives without trading one off against the other.
- Specific Initiative: Support research projects that use systems dynamics modeling or agent-based simulation to test how interventions in one dimension (e.g., AI-driven routing) affect outcomes in others (e.g., emissions and disruption recovery).

In summary, the journey toward sustainable and resilient supply chains is being fundamentally redirected by digital intelligence. For the field to fully realize its potential, it must consciously expand its intellectual boundaries, ground its innovations in practical applicability, ensure inclusive geographical and sectoral relevance, and govern the digital transition with foresight and responsibility. By following these recommendations, the SSCM community can ensure that its steep growth trajectory leads to actionable knowledge capable of transforming global supply networks into true drivers of ecological regeneration and socioeconomic stability.

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