

How Multinational Enterprises Balance Global Standardization and Local Adaptation in Sustainable Marketing: The Case of IKEA

Yashi Chen

*Shanghai Weiyu International School, Shanghai, China
Tsingsummer2021@gmail.com*

Abstract. This paper examines how IKEA combines a common sustainability strategy with market-level communication in the United Kingdom and China. The analysis is based on IKEA's global sustainability and circularity pages, together with country-specific webpages on household energy saving and circular services. Rather than assuming that Western consumers are addressed mainly through ethical language while Chinese consumers are addressed mainly through cost savings, the comparison finds a more mixed pattern. Both the UK and China pages connect energy use with household bills, promote energy-saving products and practices, and encourage customers to extend the life of furniture. The global strategy also sets common objectives for circular design, recycled or renewable materials, and circular services. Local adaptation is more visible in the language, service labels, and digital routes through which these ideas are presented. The case therefore suggests that IKEA standardizes the operational direction of sustainability while adapting the consumer-facing route through which the strategy becomes understandable in each market.

Keywords: Sustainable marketing, glocalization, global standardization, local adaptation, IKEA

1. Introduction

Climate urgency and changing consumer values have moved sustainable marketing beyond a peripheral corporate social responsibility activity and into the centre of strategic brand management [1]. For multinational enterprises, however, sustainability creates a difficult coordination problem. A common global message can support brand consistency and economies of scale, but a rigid message may not reflect local cultural expectations or everyday consumer concerns. It can also be received as superficial if local audiences cannot see a credible link between the claim and their own experience [2, 3]. At the other extreme, extensive local adaptation may raise costs and weaken a firm's global identity [4].

Much of the literature presents standardization and adaptation as competing choices. This paper instead considers how the two can be combined in value-driven sustainable marketing. IKEA is used as a case because it combines a visible global sustainability agenda with operations in markets that differ substantially in income levels, consumer habits, and media systems. The paper compares

IKEA's global Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) commitments with its marketing approaches in Western markets and China. It argues that the most durable approach is a dual-track strategy: a standardized sustainability core and a localized narrative that makes the core relevant to each market.

2. Literature review

2.1. Sustainable marketing as an evidence problem

Sustainable marketing is often presented as a set of environmental claims attached to products or brands. In this study, it is treated more cautiously as an evidence problem: a claim should be connected to an operational practice that can be observed or verified. Elkington's triple bottom line provides a useful starting point because it brings social, environmental, and economic considerations into the same business framework [5]. This does not mean that every environmental message is automatically credible. It means that the message should be assessed alongside the firm's products, sourcing, services, and reported objectives.

This distinction is important for IKEA because the company communicates sustainability through both products and services. Peattie [1] argues that sustainable marketing involves the wider marketing mix rather than promotion alone. Delmas and Burbano [3] similarly show why greenwashing becomes a risk when communication is not matched by substantive practice. For that reason, the later case analysis does not rely only on general statements about environmental responsibility. It compares the stated strategy with concrete website evidence on circular services, household energy use, product care, and resale.

2.2. Glocalization and market-level communication

The standardization-adaptation debate is more useful when it is treated as a question of scope rather than as a choice between two complete strategies. Agrawal [2] reviews the long-running debate in international advertising, while Douglas and Wind [4] caution against assuming that markets have become fully homogeneous. Svensson's concept of glocalization [6] provides a practical way to connect these positions: firms may retain common principles while allowing the customer-facing expression of those principles to vary across markets.

For sustainable marketing, this distinction matters because an environmental claim must be supported by an operational practice that remains credible across countries. At the same time, the same practice can be explained through different everyday situations. The relevant comparison is therefore not simply whether one market is more ethical and another more practical. It is whether the evidence, language, service format, and digital route used in each market make the same sustainability objective understandable to local customers. This perspective guides the IKEA comparison in the following sections.

3. Research design

3.1. Case selection

This study adopts a qualitative single-case design. IKEA is a useful case because it operates in more than 60 markets and has made sustainability a visible part of its corporate identity. The company also offers a clear setting for examining the tension between a common global strategy and locally

differentiated marketing. Its home-furnishing products are closely related to everyday household choices, which makes differences in value perception especially visible.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The study uses documentary analysis of four official IKEA webpages accessed in August 2026. Two global pages were used to identify the common sustainability and circularity objectives of the IKEA business [7, 8]. A China page and a UK page on household energy saving were then compared because both present sustainability through concrete domestic practices [9, 10]. The analysis compares the sustainability objective stated on each page, the consumer benefit used to explain that objective, the service or product mechanism offered, and the digital route through which the customer can continue the journey. This approach does not measure consumer attitudes or campaign effectiveness. It examines observable content and service architecture only; a webpage can show how a company frames sustainability without proving how customers interpret the message.

4. Findings: IKEA's global sustainable marketing

4.1. A standardized global sustainability core

IKEA's global sustainability page groups the company's strategy into three areas: healthy and sustainable living; climate, nature and circularity; and fair and equal society [7]. These areas provide a common direction for the brand across markets. The circularity agenda makes this direction more operational. By FY30, IKEA states that it aims to achieve an average circular fulfilment score of 90% across its product range, increase recycled and renewable content to at least 90%, and make circular services available in at least 80% of its markets [8].

These objectives are not limited to advertising language. The circularity page links the strategy to product design, repair, resale, removal, recycling, spare parts, and second-hand sales [8]. This provides a clearer basis for evaluating sustainability communication. A local campaign can change the route through which customers encounter the message, but it should remain connected to these common product and service commitments.

The global strategy therefore functions as a boundary for local adaptation. It allows IKEA to adjust examples, service labels, and communication channels without changing the underlying direction of circular design, longer product life, and lower dependence on virgin materials. It also provides a practical test for local communication. A market-level message should be traceable to a product feature, service, or target that appears in the common strategy. This is important because it prevents local promotion from making sustainability claims that cannot be related to the business practices described at the global level.

4.2. Localized content routes in the United Kingdom and China

The comparison does not support a simple contrast in which the UK communicates sustainability only as environmental responsibility while China communicates it only as financial saving. The UK energy-saving page states that energy use can affect electricity and household bills and suggests LEDs, motion sensors, timers, full dishwasher loads, insulation, and air drying as practical responses [10]. The China page uses a similar household frame. It explicitly refers to electricity charges and household bills, and recommends LED lighting, sensors, timers, efficient appliances, insulation, and

lower-energy domestic routines [9]. In both cases, sustainability is connected to a visible household benefit.

The difference is clearer in the presentation and navigation of services. The China website directs visitors to a circular marketplace, Buy Back and Resell, a local app, and official WeChat, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu links [9]. The UK website uses the service label Buy and sell pre-loved furniture and connects customers to channels such as Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, X, and YouTube [10]. These differences do not show that the underlying circular strategy changes. Instead, they indicate that IKEA adapts the language, named services, and digital touchpoints through which a common circularity objective is presented.

The evidence therefore supports a narrower conclusion: IKEA standardizes the sustainability infrastructure and broad product-service logic, while local adaptation occurs mainly in the consumer-facing route. This conclusion is more defensible than claiming that the two markets receive completely different sustainability messages. It is also consistent with the visible similarity of the two energy-saving pages: both turn an abstract environmental issue into a set of domestic actions and product choices. The comparison identifies differences in presentation, but it does not establish that one message is more effective than the other.

5. Discussion

5.1. The standardized core and localized narrative

The case suggests that global standardization and local adaptation operate at different levels. The standardized level includes the sustainability priorities, circular-design direction, material ambitions, and service logic described on IKEA's global pages [7, 8]. These elements need to remain consistent because they are the basis on which local claims can be evaluated. Local adaptation appears at the level of examples, service labels, wording, and media routes. Both the UK and China websites use practical household language, including energy use, bills, and product longevity. The evidence does not justify treating cost savings as a uniquely Chinese message; instead, it shows how a shared sustainability proposition can be made locally accessible without changing its operational core [9, 10].

5.2. Managerial implications

For multinational enterprises, the managerial implication is not to create unrelated sustainability messages for each market. The global team should define the operational evidence that supports a claim, while local teams decide which examples, service labels, and communication routes make that evidence useful to customers. This division of responsibility can reduce the gap between a public sustainability statement and the product or service practice behind it. It also gives local teams a clear limit: they may adapt the explanation of a sustainability benefit, but they should not change the underlying target or imply an outcome that the company cannot substantiate.

6. Conclusion

This document-based study examined how IKEA balances global standardization and local adaptation in sustainable marketing. The evidence indicates that IKEA maintains a common sustainability core through global commitments to healthy and sustainable living, circularity, and fair and equal society. It also shows that the company translates these commitments through local

customer routes. The UK and China webpages both link sustainable living to energy use, household bills, product care, and longer furniture life. Their more visible differences concern service labels, website navigation, and social-media links rather than a completely different sustainability proposition.

The study is limited by its use of public webpages and by its focus on one company in the home-furnishing sector. Website content cannot demonstrate how consumers interpret a message or whether a service changes purchasing behaviour. The comparison is also limited to the current content available on the selected pages; website content and service availability may change over time. Future research could combine website analysis with customer interviews, surveys, or experiments in several countries. Such research would test whether locally adapted language and digital routes improve the credibility or use of a common global sustainability strategy.

References

- [1] Peattie, K. (2010). Green marketing story: Evolution of a revolution. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 26(1-2), 131-158.
- [2] Agrawal, M. (1995). Review of a 40-year debate in international advertising: Standardization program versus adaptation. *International Marketing Review*, 12(1), 26-48.
- [3] Delmas, M. A., & Burbano, V. C. (2011). The drivers of greenwashing. *California Management Review*, 54(1), 64-87.
- [4] Douglas, S. P., & Wind, Y. (1987). The myth of globalization. *Columbia Journal of World Business*, 22(4), 19-29.
- [5] Elkington, J. (1997). *Cannibals with forks: The triple bottom line of 21st century business*. Capstone Publishing, Oxford.
- [6] Svensson, G. (2001). Glocalization of business activities: A glocal strategy approach. *Management Decision*, 39(1), 6-18.
- [7] IKEA. (n.d.). Sustainability is an integrated part of the IKEA business. *IKEA*. <https://www.ikea.com/global/en/our-business/sustainability/> (Accessed: 11 August 2026).
- [8] IKEA. (n.d.). Transitioning towards a circular business. *IKEA*. <https://www.ikea.com/global/en/our-business/sustainability/our-circular-agenda/> (Accessed: 11 August 2026).
- [9] IKEA China. (n.d.). Household energy-saving tips. *IKEA China*. <https://www.ikea.cn/cn/zh/ideas/tips-for-more-sustainable-living/quick-tricks-to-save-energy-at-home-pubad783f90> (Accessed: 11 August 2026).
- [10] IKEA UK. (n.d.). Quick tricks to save energy at home. *IKEA UK*. <https://www.ikea.com/gb/en/ideas/tips-for-more-sustainable-living/quick-tricks-to-save-energy-at-home-pubd7c144e0/> (Accessed: 11 August 2026).