Guest editorial: Beyond the horizons of innovation: rethinking logistics, operations, and supply chain management strategies

1. Introduction

The *International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management* (IJPDLM) has a long-standing tradition of using special issues to advance scholarly debate on topics of pressing contemporary relevance, future significance and methodological importance (e.g. Chan *et al*., 2025; Cheah *et al*., 2023; Patrucco *et al*., 2025; Russo *et al*., 2024; Silva *et al*., 2023). This special issue continues that tradition by rethinking and expanding the scope of innovation in logistics, operations and supply chain management. Against the backdrop of accelerating technological development, systemic transformation, mounting sustainability pressures and evolving governance frameworks, innovation can no longer be understood merely as a set of isolated initiatives or discrete technological applications. Rather, it must be examined in relation to decision-making processes, value creation and system-level outcomes within and across supply chain frameworks. As this special issue comes to a close, this editorial reflects on the collective contributions of the articles included, synthesizes cross-cutting insights and outlines promising avenues for future research.

Recent contributions in IJPDLM further underscore that supply chain innovation remains a conceptually diverse and evolving construct, spanning multiple definitions and degrees ranging from incremental to more systemic and transformative change while also highlighting that the most consequential advances are likely to emerge at the intersections of sustainability, risk management, digitalization and talent development (Kahn and Cook, 2026; van Hoek and Wong, 2025). Instead of viewing innovation as a narrow, purely technological phenomenon, this special issue takes a broader, more integrative approach. It conceptualizes innovation as a multi-level, socio-technical and institutional process that unfolds among diverse actors, networks and regulatory contexts. The articles challenge traditional paradigms in logistics, operations and supply chain management. They demonstrate that innovation increasingly emerges at the intersection of technology, resilience, sustainability and governance. Together, the papers advance the field by highlighting shared mechanisms, tensions and boundary conditions that extend beyond specific empirical settings and methodological approaches.

2. Integrative insights across the special issue themes

We summarize the contributions organized around the four thematic pillars of the special issue: (1) technological advancements, (2) resilience and adaptability, (3) sustainability and decarbonization and (4) governance and financing.

2.1 Technological advancements

A fundamental insight emerging from this special issue is the role of technological innovation in reconfiguring decision-making processes in logistics, operations and supply chains. Technological advancements in automation, electrification and computing have evolved from mere efficiency-enhancing tools to agents of change in logistics business models and value creation strategies, altering how decisions are generated, interpreted and enacted across supply chain levels. For example, additive manufacturing influences the design of supply chains in market segments with complex products and a high demand for customized solutions by enabling decentralized production and reduced lead times

International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management
Vol. 56 No. 5, 2026
pp. 509-519

e-ISSN: 1758-664X
p-ISSN: 0960-0035
DOI 10.1108/IJPDLM-06-2026-565

(Ronchini *et al*., 2023; Verboeket and Krikke, 2019). Similarly, quantum-inspired computing technologies have the potential to enhance operational flexibility and agility in manufacturing and logistics by enabling the faster optimization of complex supply chains and real-time decision-making. This enhancement is particularly evident in the redefined locus and coordination of decisions across supply chain tiers (Núñez-Merino *et al*., 2024). Furthermore, the transparency and visibility provided by these technologies have evolved into strategic capabilities that extend beyond compliance with product safety, recall management and sustainability standards (Morgan *et al*., 2023; Sodhi and Tang, 2019).

However, recent research posits that value generation is increasingly contingent on congruence between technological capabilities and organizational decision-making architectures. These architectures include the distribution of decision-making authority, the timing of decisions and managerial trust in algorithmic outputs when seeking competitive advantage among multiple stakeholders (Hoang *et al*., 2023; Zhong *et al*., 2023). This special issue underscores the importance of exploring discrepancies between data availability and decision authority or between algorithmic recommendations and managerial judgment. Such discrepancies can substantially curtail the strategic potential of advanced technologies, even when technical adoption is successful. Technological innovations yield strategic benefits only when embedded within adaptive governance structures, managerial cognition and inter-organizational coordination mechanisms (Hendriksen, 2023; Vlachos *et al*., 2026). This insight highlights the need to move beyond deterministic views of technology adoption and adopt process-oriented explanations that highlight managerial sensemaking, strategic trade-offs and path dependencies in logistics and supply chain innovation.

2.2 Resilience and adaptability

Contributions addressing resilience and adaptability converge on a critical reframing that is particularly salient in logistics, operations and supply chain management. In other words, resilience should not be viewed merely as a result of a firm's capabilities. Rather, it should be considered an emergent quality of the system arising from the dynamic interactions among actors, technologies and governance structures across supply chains. This perspective is especially important given the growing frequency and complexity of disruptions, such as climate change, economic crises, geopolitical tensions, trade and tariff conflicts, inflationary pressures, volatile fuel prices and the rapid diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI) (Paul and Chowdhury, 2021). As these disruptions intensify and overlap, the ability of logistics and supply chain management systems to adapt, reconfigure and swiftly recover has become a strategic imperative for organizations worldwide (Dev *et al*., 2021).

Recent research emphasizes that resilience in logistics and supply chains is not limited to the capabilities of individual firms. Rather, resilience is reflected in system-level properties embedded in network structures, coordination mechanisms and decision-making architectures (Gruchmann *et al*., 2024). Thus, this special issue reveals a consistent theme of innovations in digitalization, network design and coordination. These innovations enhance resilience by enabling greater visibility, flexibility and rapid reconfiguration across supply chain tiers. Notably, these contributions demonstrate that innovations oriented toward resilience often involve ongoing tensions between efficiency, redundancy and sustainability. Rather than resolving these tensions through optimization alone, previous studies have emphasized the importance of strategic design choices and adaptive governance mechanisms that enable supply chains to balance competing objectives in uncertain conditions (Kareem *et al*., 2025; Ghobakhloo *et al*., 2025; Zouari *et al*., 2021). These studies also underscore the role of digital maturity and the adoption of digital tools in strengthening supply chain resilience (Holgado *et al*., 2024). Together, these contributions advance resilience research by providing a systemic perspective that integrates innovation, structure and behavior into a unified analytical framework. This framework captures how adaptability emerges at the level of the supply chain as a whole rather than being reducible to the capabilities of individual actors.

2.3 Sustainability and decarbonization

This special issue explores the integration of sustainability-oriented innovations in logistics, operations and supply chain management. These innovations are presented as strategic imperatives and sources of competitive differentiation rather than peripheral or compliance-driven concerns. Together, these notions demonstrate that innovation plays a pivotal role in advancing sustainability and decarbonization. Solakivi *et al.* (2025) argue that this can be achieved by incorporating environmental and social objectives into logistics network design, decision-making processes and inter-organizational coordination mechanisms.

According to existing research, green innovation can mitigate environmental impacts within multi-tier supply chains and encourage consumers to engage in co-value creation (Min *et al.*, 2019; Yao *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, contemporary perspectives are increasingly incorporating social dimensions into a holistic understanding of sustainable supply chain management (Hohn and Durach, 2023; Thies *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, existing research underscores the pivotal role of innovative (reverse) logistics concepts and circular economy models as structural enablers of sustainability (see Dev *et al.*, 2020; Gatenholm *et al.*, 2021). These concepts are often reinforced by digitalization and enhanced inter-organizational collaboration (Rasool *et al.*, 2023). A fundamental insight shared by these studies is the shift in perspective regarding sustainability. Specifically, there has been a transition from viewing sustainability as a cost or regulatory obligation to viewing it as a relational, reputational and value-creating asset shared among supply chain stakeholders, including consumers. This shift is facilitated by increased transparency, traceability and engagement (Furlan and Podrecca, 2026). However, the studies also highlight ongoing challenges related to measurement, incentive alignment and the scalability of sustainable logistics solutions (Solakivi *et al.*, 2025). These findings underscore the importance of conceptualizing sustainability and decarbonization as system-level outcomes rather than isolated operational improvements.

2.4 Governance and financing

This special issue's final thematic cluster emphasizes the critical yet underdeveloped role of policy, financing and governance mechanisms in shaping logistics and supply chain innovation trajectories. While prior research acknowledges the substantial influence of regulatory frameworks, public incentives and governance structures on innovation in the logistics sector, our special issue stresses that these mechanisms actively co-evolve with technological and organizational change rather than merely constraining or enabling innovation. Consequently, governance and financing are recognized as indispensable components of innovation strategy rather than external conditions. Many studies highlight the strategic advantages of proactive engagement in regulatory and policy environments (Adjei-Bamfo *et al.*, 2025; Grover and Dresner, 2022). Firms and supply chains that anticipate regulatory developments and align their innovation strategies accordingly can secure a competitive advantage, legitimacy benefits and more favorable access to financial resources (Petropoulos *et al.*, 2026).

On the other hand, reactive compliance approaches can hinder innovation by limiting it to minor adjustments, resulting in missed strategic opportunities. These findings highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of the interactions among policy, financing and governance mechanisms (Gualandris *et al.*, 2015; Holgado *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, exploring how these institutional dynamics influence decision-making processes, investment patterns and the creation of long-term value in logistics, operations and supply chain management is crucial.

3. Observations on the special issue articles

We synthesize the key contributions of this special issue and consider their broader theoretical and practical implications for logistics and supply chain research. Although the articles address diverse topics – including smart packaging, circular economy strategies, cross-regional supply

chain adaptability, supplier resilience assessment and green fuel-driven business model innovation – collectively they illustrate how contemporary supply chains are being reshaped by technological, organizational and institutional transformations. Table 1 provides a structured overview of the four studies and their contributions across the four pillars.

The article "Smart packaging's role in enhancing logistics capabilities for a circular economy: a systematic literature review" by Wangwacharakul *et al*. (2026) offers a technology- and data-driven perspective on circular logistics. The article clarifies the mechanisms through which smart packaging enhances logistics capabilities and supports circular economy strategies. The authors develop a multi-layered conceptual framework linking smart packaging-enabled functionalities to specific logistics capabilities and, subsequently, to circular economy outcomes by drawing on a systematic review of 46 peer-reviewed articles. The analysis shows that smart packaging fundamentally changes how logistics systems manage information. By enhancing data visibility and traceability, smart packaging enables proactive supply management, responsive demand management and integrated coordination mechanisms. These capabilities support circular economy strategies of reducing, reusing, recycling and remanufacturing. Importantly, the study moves beyond descriptive associations by articulating eight testable propositions, thereby translating digital circularity into an empirically examinable research agenda. This contribution reinforces a central theme of this special issue: technological innovation generates systemic impact only when it reconfigures underlying logistics capabilities and coordination architectures.

The article "Navigating the crossroads: supply chain adaptability, internal coopetition and innovation in chain restaurants' cross-regional expansion," by Zhao *et al*. (2026), examines how chain restaurants leverage supply chain adaptability and internal team "coopetition" to drive innovation during cross-regional expansion. The authors use a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with 15 managers and a three-wave quantitative survey of 407 restaurant professionals in China. They draw on dynamic capability theory and the attention-based view. The findings reveal that supply chain adaptability, including sensing, seizing and, notably, standardization significantly increases product and service innovation. Internal coopetition, or the simultaneous cooperation and competition between expatriate and local teams, is a crucial mediator of this relationship, channeling adaptive capabilities into

Table 1. Overview of the four studies based on four pillars

Article	Technological advancements	Resilience and adaptability	Sustainability and decarbonization	Governance and financing
Wangwacharakul *et al*. (2026): Smart packaging's role in enhancing logistics capabilities for a circular economy: a systematic literature review	x		x	
Zhao *et al*. (2026): Navigating the crossroads: supply chain adaptability, internal coopetition and innovation in chain restaurants' cross-regional expansion		x		
Lang *et al*. (2026): From risk to resilience: a multi-layered framework for supplier risk assessment to strengthen supply chain resilience		x		
Fracarolli Nunes *et al*. (2026): Green fuels and emerging business models for sustainable logistics: decoding innovation for the genesis of new supply chains			x	x

tangible outcomes such as localized menus and service protocols. Specifically, the study identifies "sensing" as the primary bottleneck for innovation performance and reveals that standardization serves as a vital stabilizing platform for creative experimentation rather than merely an efficiency tool. The study concludes that managers can enhance cross-regional success by balancing global standards with local flexibility and fostering constructive team tensions. This transforms supply chain adjustments into sustained competitive advantages.

The article "From risk to resilience: a multi-layered framework for supplier risk assessment to strengthen supply chain resilience," by Lang *et al*. (2026), develops an integrated, operationalizable framework for assessing supplier-level resilience capabilities. Addressing the fragmentation of existing research, the study consolidates environmental, financial, social and operational risk dimensions into a coherent, multi-layered structure. Using a node-level approach combining a structured literature review and expert workshops, the authors derive measurable, supplier-specific indicators and assign corresponding information sources, such as certifications, indices and internal records. This structured framework translates abstract resilience constructs into testable, empirically applicable components, enabling cross-sector validation and industry adaptation. By bridging the gap between theoretical constructs and operational indicators, the study propels resilience research forward, shifting the focus from conceptual discussions to systematic measurement and proactive risk governance. Within the broader context of this special issue, the framework exemplifies how innovation in risk assessment tools and governance mechanisms strengthens system-level adaptability rather than merely mitigating isolated disruptions.

Finally, the article "Green fuels and emerging business models for sustainable logistics: decoding innovation for the genesis of new supply chains," by Fracarolli Nunes *et al*. (2026), examines how sustainable logistics transitions give rise to new supply chain configurations and business models. Grounded in social exchange and transition management theories, the study explores the development of a biomethane-centered logistics ecosystem. Through 2 factorial, scenario-based behavioral experiments with 345 USA respondents, the authors assess stakeholder openness to partnerships and examine the reputational spillover effects associated with sustainable collaborations. The findings reveal differentiated attitudes among partners: truck manufacturers demonstrate greater openness to collaboration than fuel distributors do, and sustainable partnerships generate positive reputational effects across the supply chain. These results underscore that scaling green fuels involves not only technological challenges but also relational and governance challenges involving trust, legitimacy, financing and reputational dynamics. Thus, the study contributes to research on sustainable business model innovation by illustrating how new logistics supply chains emerge through multi-stakeholder alignment and reputational incentives. In doing so, the study reinforces a key message of this special issue: sustainability transitions are co-produced through behavioral, institutional and financial mechanisms that extend beyond technical feasibility.

Taken together, these published articles reveal a unifying theoretical insight: innovation in logistics and supply chains is transformative when it reconfigures underlying capabilities, governance mechanisms, relational dynamics and measurement architectures. Technological tools, adaptive strategies, risk assessment frameworks and sustainable business models function as pivotal catalysts for this change. However, these innovations only have systemic ramifications when they are integrated into coherent organizational structures and coordinated inter-organizational arrangements. Thus, transformation is not merely the product of isolated innovations, but rather, it emerges from integrating these innovations into aligned capability systems and governance.

4. Theoretical and practical implications of the special issue articles

The four articles in this special issue illustrate how to understand innovation in logistics, operations and supply chain management. Rather than viewing innovation as a standalone technological advance or a single managerial decision, the articles show that innovation occurs

as an ongoing process that reshapes capabilities, governance structures and network-level outcomes simultaneously.

4.1 Theoretical implications

A central implication concerns the nature of innovation itself. Throughout the articles, innovation is not depicted as merely the introduction of a new tool or technology. Rather, innovation is depicted as the reconfiguration of underlying capabilities. For example, smart packaging enhances logistics capabilities by transforming information interfaces. Adaptability and internal coopetition reshape how organizations sense and respond to market changes. Structured supplier risk assessment frameworks institutionalize resilience within governance routines. Innovation in sustainable business models around biomethane reorganizes value creation across multiple stakeholders. In each case, innovation only becomes meaningful when it alters how supply chains operate at a foundational level. This suggests that future theorizing should move beyond adoption-centric frameworks and conceptualize innovation as an evolving process of capability restructuring. This shift encourages longitudinal, process-based research designs that can capture how innovations stabilize, scale and interact over time.

A second theoretical implication emerges from the relational dimension evident in the contributions. Innovation does not occur in isolation. Rather, it is mediated by internal coordination structures, inter-organizational trust, monitoring systems and reputational dynamics. For example, adaptability leads to innovation only when internal coopetition channels diverse perspectives productively. Supplier resilience depends on governance instruments that make vulnerabilities visible and manageable. Sustainable fuel ecosystems depend on stakeholder openness, legitimacy and perceived reputational benefits. These findings challenge the notion that governance, regulation and institutional context are merely background conditions. Rather, governance mechanisms are integral to innovation processes. These mechanisms shape incentives, structure collaboration and determine whether new capabilities gain traction. Therefore, theoretical models of supply chain innovation need to embed relational and institutional dynamics at their core rather than positioning them at the periphery.

A third implication relates to the level at which the effects of innovation materialize. Resilience, circularity and decarbonization do not exist solely at the firm level; rather, they emerge from coordinated interactions across supply chain networks. The smart packaging framework demonstrates that digital functionalities only enable circular outcomes when embedded across logistics interfaces. The supplier risk assessment model shows how structured governance can enhance network-wide robustness. The biomethane study reveals that new supply chains arise through multi-stakeholder alignment rather than unilateral action. This systemic perspective encourages scholars to move beyond firm-centric analyses toward multi-level frameworks integrating micro-level behavior, organizational routines and institutional environments. Therefore, innovation research in logistics and supply chain management must embrace analytical designs capable of capturing cross-level interactions and emergent properties.

4.2 Practical implications

The theoretical shifts outlined above have important implications for managerial decision-making. First, innovation should be approached as capability development rather than technological acquisition. Simply investing in digital tools, sustainability technologies or analytical systems is insufficient if organizational structures, decision-making processes and coordination mechanisms remain unchanged. Managers must regularly assess how new technologies reconfigure processes and reshape organizational responsibilities while considering the rapid pace of technological development.

Second, relational and governance alignment are strategic assets. Trust-building, transparent monitoring systems and proactive stakeholder engagement increase the likelihood that innovation initiatives will grow and create value. The studies in this special issue show that reputational benefits, internal coordination structures and structured risk assessment mechanisms can significantly impact innovation outcomes.

Third, resilience and sustainability must be designed at the network level. Firms operating in isolation cannot achieve system-wide robustness or decarbonization. Instead, coordinated action is required across suppliers, distributors, manufacturers and regulators. Managers must adopt a systemic perspective that transcends organizational boundaries.

Finally, the recurring tensions between efficiency and redundancy, standardization and flexibility and automation and managerial engagement underscore that innovation rarely eliminates trade-offs; rather, it changes their configuration. Effective management lies in dynamically orchestrating these tensions rather than attempting to resolve them once and for all.

5. Future research directions: beyond the horizons

The collective insights of this special issue should lay the groundwork for future research endeavors. Future studies should strive to overcome the limitations of existing research by developing a comprehensive understanding of the complexity, uncertainty and systemic nature of contemporary logistics, operations and supply chains. They should also explore new research questions arising from technological innovations (Delfmann *et al*., 2018). This special issue concludes by unveiling numerous promising avenues for future inquiry. There is a particular need for longitudinal and process-oriented studies that capture how innovations emerge, evolve and interact over time across supply chain networks (Grimm *et al*., 2024; Min *et al*., 2019). Additionally, more attention should be given to micro-level decision-making processes and managerial cognition in technology-enabled logistics systems to better understand how managers interpret, trust and act upon increasingly sophisticated analytical and algorithmic tools (e.g. generative AI vs. agentic AI; Hendriksen, 2023; Toorajipour *et al*., 2021).

Furthermore, subsequent research endeavors should conceptualize resilience and sustainability as interconnected system attributes rather than examining them as separate performance outcomes (Lang *et al*., 2026). This approach aligns with the inherent structural interdependencies and trade-offs that are characteristic of contemporary supply chains. Advancements in this field can be achieved by examining the co-evolution of innovation, governance and institutional change across various geographical and sectoral contexts. It is important to acknowledge that regulatory, cultural and market conditions influence innovation trajectories differently (Kano *et al*., 2020). Finally, advancing knowledge in this field requires deeper engagement with interdisciplinary theories and methods that can capture the dynamic, multi-level complexity of contemporary logistics systems (Furlan and Podrecca, 2026).

6. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this special issue demonstrates that innovation in logistics, operations and supply chain management is a fundamental organizing principle of contemporary supply chains and not an incidental or sporadic occurrence. These innovations influence value creation, risk management and the pursuit of broader societal goals. Together, the contributions demonstrate that the field of innovation in logistics, operations and supply chain management is entering a new phase of research and practice, one marked by systemic interdependencies, strategic complexity and heightened societal relevance. This phase shifts the field's focus from incremental improvement to transformative change.

This special issue aims to inform and advance ongoing scholarly debates and catalyze future research that extends the boundaries of innovation in logistics, operations and supply

chain management. Although the challenges ahead are substantial, they also present significant opportunities for theoretically grounded and practically relevant research. We thank Shashank Rao, Ivan Russo and Ha Ta, (managing) editors of the *International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management*, for the opportunity to develop this special issue. We are also grateful to the authors for their persistence through multiple rounds of review and to the reviewers whose rigorous, constructive feedback made this special issue possible. Together, these collective efforts have enabled a deeper exploration of "Beyond the horizons of innovation: rethinking logistics, operations and supply chain management strategies."

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Acknowledgments
Even though this article does not use the statistical software SmartPLS (https://www.smartpls.com), Christian M. Ringle acknowledges a financial interest in SmartPLS.

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