

# E-COMMERCE: NEW CHALLENGES FOR THE SUSTAINABLE TRANSITION

Today, e-commerce is fully part of the consumer shopping experience, revolutionizing the way consumers and businesses interact and bringing them closer than ever. When purchasing online, EU consumers expect products and services to comply with EU law and adhere to fair trade practices, therefore they have a legitimate expectation of quality and durability.

## 70% of consumers

regularly buy products online, both from sellers' e-shops and through online marketplaces.<sup>1</sup>

## 91% of consumers

think that online marketplace operators should be held liable if issues with a product cannot be resolved by the seller.<sup>2</sup>

## 93% of consumers

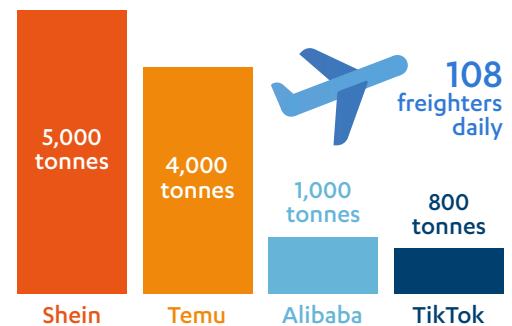
believe that products sold on online marketplaces should be safe and comply with EU legal requirements.<sup>2</sup>

## The environmental impact of e-commerce

E-commerce imports present challenges throughout their entire lifecycle – from production and transportation to usage and ultimately waste management. The business model of emerging e-commerce giants like Temu and Shein relies on small parcel shipments (goods valued under €150), which are often exempt from customs duties and controls due to a loophole in EU law.

In 2023, **4.6 billion lower-value parcels** were flown into the EU. In 2024, an estimated **10 million parcels per day** are arriving in the EU Single Market.

E-commerce shipments worldwide per day (2023)<sup>3</sup>



## The hidden costs of the e-commerce boom

The rapid rise in e-commerce has led to a surge in unsafe and non-compliant products, posing significant risks across multiple areas:

- **Rising health and safety risks for consumers:** Many imported products fail to meet EU safety standards, exposing consumers to serious health and safety hazards.
- **Environmental impact:** The high volume of low-cost, short-lived goods contributes to unsustainable production, excessive waste, and increased carbon emissions.
- **Unfair competition:** Non-compliant sellers gain an unfair advantage over legitimate businesses, undermining fair market conditions and EU competitiveness across sectors.
- **Enforcement strain:** The sheer volume of direct-to-consumer imports places an unsustainable burden on enforcement authorities, making oversight and compliance checks increasingly difficult.

A Testachats (Belgium) investigation into Shein products highlights the environmental and health risks of unchecked imports. Many tested children's items contained hazardous chemicals, including endocrine disruptors and pollutants harmful to both consumers and ecosystems.

The surge in e-commerce has intensified transportation activities, leading to increased emissions. The proliferation of express delivery services, reliance on air freight, and the growth of last-mile deliveries in urban areas contribute significantly to this trend.

At the end of their short lifespan, non-compliant products and their packaging contribute to waste management issues. The costs for waste treatment are likely not covered, and these products often cannot be recycled due to the materials used in their manufacturing.

1. EC communication on ecommerce – <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/e-commerce-communication-comprehensive-eu-toolbox-safe-and-sustainable-e-commerce>

2. <https://www.vzbv.de/pressemitteilungen/online-shopping-verbraucherinnen-erwarten-sichere-produkte>

3. <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/rise-fast-fashion-shein-temu-rolls-global-air-cargo-industry-2024-02-21/>

## Building on strong foundations: existing rules for a fair and sustainable market

The EU has established a legal framework to enhance the sustainability of goods and services entering the Single Market.

### The EU Ecolabel

**1992** | It is a voluntary scheme for the most environmentally friendly products and services on the market. The [label is a signpost for consumers](#) who are looking for greener and healthier options.

### The EU strategy for sustainable and circular textiles

**2023** | This is the EU's plan to halt fast fashion by making clothing and other textiles more sustainable. It focuses on reducing textile waste as well as obligations and incentives for brands to make clothes that last longer, can be repaired and recycled, are free from toxic chemicals and are produced respecting the environment and social rights.

### Right to Repair

**2024** | This gives consumers the [legal right to have their products](#), like phones or washing machines, repaired instead of throwing them away. It helps reduce waste and makes products last longer.

However, **stronger enforcement of the ESPR** and the **upcoming REACH revision** will be essential to ensure these rules effectively **drive the transition to a fair and sustainable market**.



### REACH (Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation, and Restriction of Chemicals)

**2007** | This overarching law aims to keep harmful chemicals out of products we use daily, like clothing, childcare items, and cleaning products, to protect consumers and the environment.

### The Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR)

**2024** | These are [rules to make products more environmentally friendly](#) from the very start of their life cycle. For example, appliances like fridges or TVs are more energy-efficient and repairable, so they are better for the planet and your wallet.

## Putting the pieces together: a comprehensive approach to sustainable e-commerce

To tackle the environmental challenges of e-commerce and ensure the EU enforces its rules while protecting consumers, policymakers must take several key actions:



4. [https://echa.europa.eu/documents/10162/17088/project\\_report\\_ref-8\\_en.pdf/ccf2c453-da0e-c185-908e-3a0343b25802?t=1638885422475](https://echa.europa.eu/documents/10162/17088/project_report_ref-8_en.pdf/ccf2c453-da0e-c185-908e-3a0343b25802?t=1638885422475)