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Research Article

Sustainable Development, Green Chemistry, and Its Applications

Aleza Rizvi[1], Omveer Singh[2], Syed Shariq Mian[3], Desh Deepak Pandey[4], Rinkesh Kumar[5], Rizwan Ul Hasan[6]

[1]Hygia Institute of Pharmacy, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.
[2]R.K. Institute of pharmacy Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, India.
[3]Era College of Pharmacy, Era University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.
[4]Yash Raj Institute of Pharmacy, Lucknow Uttar Pradesh, India.
[5]Dr. Anar Singh College of Pharmacy Major S D Singh University Fatehgarh, Farrukhabad, Uttar Pradesh, India.
[6]Era College of Pharmacy, Era University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.
For correspondence Email: [6]rizwanhasan786@gmail.com
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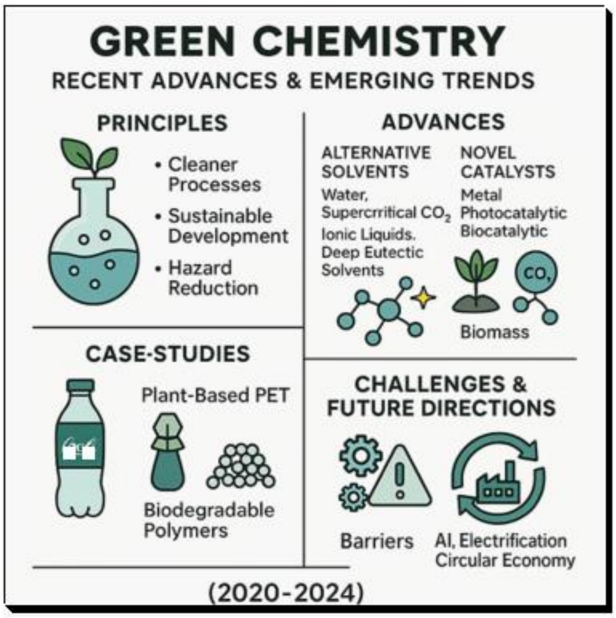
GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



Abstract

Green chemistry (GC)–the design of chemical processes that reduce or eliminate hazardous substances – provides a framework for achieving sustainable development in industry and technology. This review summarizes recent advances (2020–2024) and emerging trends in green chemistry, highlighting how new catalysts, solvents, and biotechnologies are enabling cleaner processes. Key topics include alternative solvents (water, supercritical CO_2, ionic liquids, deep eutectic solvents), novel catalysts (metal, photocatalytic, and biocatalytic systems), and renewable feedstocks (biomass, CO_2). We discuss case studies such as plant-based PET ("Plant Bottle") and biodegradable polymers, and note how industry adoption of GC principles has already reduced waste and emissions. We also examine current challenges – economic, regulatory, and technical barriers that slow implementation – and outline future directions (AI-driven process design, electrification of synthesis, circular economy). The content is presented for an audience of chemistry and environmental science students, with references to recent literature.

Keywords: Green Chemistry; Sustainable Development; Renewable Resources; Biocatalysis; Green Solvents; Carbon Dioxide Utilization; Industrial Applications; Future Trends.

INTRODUCTION

Green chemistry plays a crucial role in sustainable development by promoting environmentally friendly chemical processes that minimize waste and reduce hazardous substances. It aligns with global sustainability goals by focusing on efficient resource utilization, pollution prevention, and safer alternatives in industrial applications. Green chemistry (GC) is defined as "the design, manufacture and application of chemical products and processes to reduce or eliminate the use or generation of hazardous substances". It is a proactive approach that emphasizes pollution prevention, safer reagents, and efficient use of raw materials. The twelve principles of GC (proposed by Anastas and Warner) include waste prevention, atom economy, less hazardous synthesis, safer solvents, energy efficiency, and design for degradation, among others. These principles guide chemists to create processes that are both economically viable and environmentally benign. In essence, GC aligns closely with the goals of sustainable development – for example, reducing chemical risk contributes to UN Sustainable Development Goals on responsible consumption and climate action. As one review notes, GC represents a key "concept towards achieving sustainability" in the chemical industry [1-5]. The chemical and manufacturing industries have already seen tangible benefits from adopting green practices. For instance, U.S. pharmaceutical manufacturers reduced volatile organic solvent (VOC) use by ~50% between 2004 and 2013 by embracing GC techniques. Similarly, enforcing green practices has led to closures or upgrades of polluting plants in countries like India and China, indicating growing regulatory pressure to be cleaner. Nonetheless, the field is evolving rapidly: new catalysts, process technologies, and design tools have emerged in the past five years, and researchers are increasingly focusing on biotechnological routes, CO_2 conversion, and digital design methods. The following sections review recent trends (2020–2024) in GC, illustrate industrial case studies, and discuss challenges and future prospects for making chemistry more sustainable [6-10].

Key Principles of Green Chemistry

- Minimizing Chemical Hazards: Designing chemicals with reduced toxicity.
- Sustainable Sourcing: Using renewable feedstocks instead of fossil-based materials.
- Energy Efficiency: Optimizing reactions to lower energy consumption.
- Waste Reduction: Implementing atom economy and recycling strategies.
- Safer Solvents & Reactions: Avoiding harmful solvents and promoting solvent-free processes.

Applications of Green Chemistry

- Pharmaceutical Industry: Developing safer drug synthesis methods with fewer toxic byproducts.
- Agriculture: Creating eco-friendly pesticides and fertilizers.
- Energy Science: Advancing solar cells, fuel cells, and sustainable batteries.
- Nanotechnology: Designing green catalysts for efficient chemical transformations.

Green chemistry is transforming industries by integrating sustainability into chemical design and manufacturing.

Principles of Green Chemistry

Green chemistry is built on the 12 Principles of Green Chemistry, which can be summarized as follows:

- **Prevention of Waste:** It is better to prevent waste than to treat or clean up waste after it is formed. Processes should be designed to minimize byproducts.
- **Atom Economy:** Synthetic methods should maximize the incorporation of all materials used into the final product.
- **Less Hazardous Synthesis:** Wherever possible, synthetic methods should use and generate substances with low toxicity.
- **Design of Safer Chemicals:** Chemical products should be designed to have their desired function while being as non-toxic as possible.
- **Safer Solvents and Auxiliaries:** Use of auxiliary substances (e.g. solvents, separation agents) should be minimized and, if used, be innocuous.
- **Energy Efficiency:** Reactions should be conducted at ambient temperature and pressure whenever feasible.
- **Use of Renewable Feedstocks:** Raw materials should be renewable rather than depleting wherever practical.
- **Reduce Derivatives:** Minimize or eliminate steps that use blocking/protecting groups or generate intermediates, to avoid extra waste.
- **Catalysis:** Use catalytic reagents (which can be recovered and reused) rather than stoichiometric reagents.
- **Design for Degradation:** Chemical products should be designed so that at the end of their life they break down into harmless substances.

- **Real-time Analysis:** Enable in-process monitoring and control to prevent formation of byproducts.
- **Inherently Safer Chemistry:** Substances used should minimize potential for chemical accidents (e.g. explosions, fires).

Figure 1. Principles of Green Chemistry.

These principles emphasize an upstream, preventive approach: preventing hazards and waste is far preferable to treating pollution later. As one review notes, the main aims of GC are "preventing waste formation rather than devising methods to clean it up, developing atom-efficient technologies based on renewable feedstock, using minimum energy, and inherently safer chemicals" (Figure 1). A complementary concept is Green Engineering, which likewise has 12 principles focused on designing products and processes to be benign. Together, green chemistry and engineering provide a holistic framework to make technology more sustainable [11-14].

Green Chemistry in Sustainable Development

Green chemistry is often cited as a key strategy for sustainable development. By reducing toxins and resource use, GC contributes to cleaner air, water and products, while supporting economic growth. For example, replacing fossil feedstocks with plant biomass can reduce dependency on depleting resources and lower greenhouse gas emissions. The US EPA's Green Chemistry program reports that adoption of GC practices in industry leads to both environmental and economic benefits. Indeed, multinational companies have made commitments to GC: e.g. "Plant Bottle" PET packaging made partially from sugarcane (up to 30% bioplastic), which cut lifecycle carbon emissions by ~25%. Large chemical firms (e.g. BASF's Ecoflex® and Ecovio®) now produce biodegradable polyesters from renewable starches. These examples illustrate how GC can translate into commercial products that support sustainability. At the same time, green chemistry addresses critical societal challenges. By designing safer chemicals and processes, GC helps to protect human health and ecosystems – for instance, by avoiding ozone-depleting solvents or carcinogenic reagents. The alignment of GC with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been noted by experts: GC directly supports SDGs for Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure, Responsible Consumption & Production, and Climate Action, among others. In practice, this means new chemistry must be evaluated holistically: e.g. life-cycle assessments are increasingly used to ensure that a "green" process is truly better overall (see challenges below) [15-18].

Recent Advances and Trends in Green Chemistry

Alternative Solvents and Reaction Media

Replacing hazardous solvents is a major focus of current green chemistry. Water, ethanol, and supercritical CO_2 ($scCO_2$) are used when possible as benign alternatives. For example, hydrogenation reactions can be run in $scCO_2$: a case study from industry showed that selective hydrogenation of isophorone to 3,3,5-trimethylcyclohexanone could be done in $scCO_2$ with no by-products. Similarly, ethanol (a bio-derived alcohol) often replaces benzene or chlorinated solvents. Innovative solvent systems are also emerging. Ionic liquids (salts liquid at low temperature) and deep eutectic solvents (DESs) have attracted much interest due to their low volatility and tunable properties. DESs in particular are "promising green alternatives", but recent life-cycle assessments caution that some DESs may have hidden impacts. For example, production of choline chloride/urea DES (reline) showed lower impacts than dichloromethane but higher impacts than ethanol, due to the upstream synthesis of its components. Thus, while DESs are a trending topic, chemists are carefully studying their net sustainability before broad adoption. In practice, many industries are adopting solvent-free or solid-supported methods (e.g. mechanochemistry, fluorous phases, solid reagents) to further reduce solvent use [19-22].

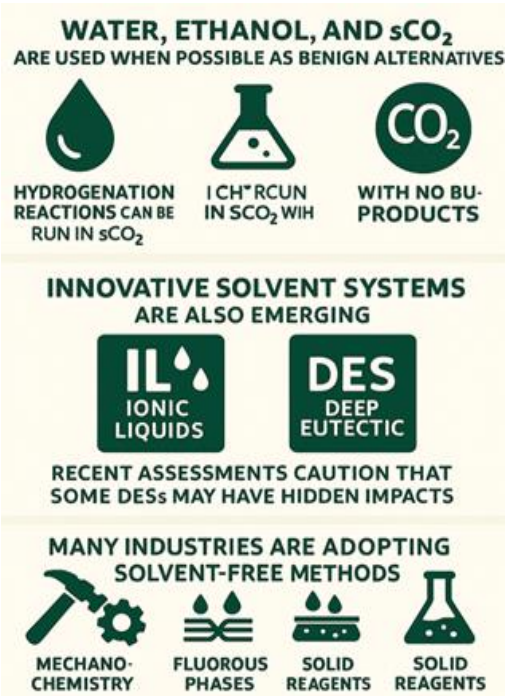


Figure 2. Replacing Hazardous Solvents.

Catalysis: Chemical and Biocatalytic Routes

Catalysis – using small amounts of catalysts to accelerate reactions – is a cornerstone of green synthesis. By definition, catalytic processes generate fewer wastes and higher selectivity than stoichiometric reactions. Advances in catalysis have been a major trend: new transition-metal catalysts, photocatalysts and organocatalysts now allow efficient bond-forming reactions under mild conditions. For instance, photoredox catalysis (light-driven catalysis) and dual catalysis combine visible light with metal catalysts to enable difficult transformations (e.g. C–H activation) with low energy input. A 2021 review highlights how organic electrochemistry (using electricity) has experienced a "renaissance" as a green platform, since electrons can replace chemical oxidants or reductants. In such electro-organic synthesis, exceptional selectivities and novel redox mechanisms are achieved, often in tandem with photocatalysis. These methods are increasingly viable for pharma and fine-chemistry, offering cleaner alternatives to traditional routes.

Biocatalysis (using enzymes) is another fast-growing area. Enzymes operate in water, at ambient conditions, and with very high specificity – attributes that perfectly match green goals. Recent years have seen an "explosion of interest" in enzymatic synthesis due to advances in molecular biology. Protein engineering and directed evolution allow chemists to tailor enzymes for non-natural reactions. For example, engineered enzymes are now used industrially to produce pharmaceuticals and commodity chemicals with minimal waste. Enzymes can also run in novel media: researchers have shown that many enzymes remain active in ionic liquids and DESs, opening new process options. Multi-enzyme cascade processes (where several enzymes work in sequence) are an emerging trend, allowing one-pot synthesis of complex molecules without isolating intermediates [23-27].

Renewable Feedstocks and Energy Conversion

Greener chemistry aims to replace petrochemical feedstocks with renewable ones, and to harness renewable energy in synthesis. Biomass (plants, agricultural waste) is a prime renewable feedstock: it can be converted to biofuels (biodiesel, bioethanol) and to chemicals (e.g. bioplastics). For instance, lignocellulosic sugars have been used to make biobased PET, nylon intermediates, and acrylic acid as noted in industry reports. Algae, cellulose, and waste oils are also being explored as starting materials for green monomers and fuels. Another major trend is carbon dioxide (CO_2) utilization. CO_2 is abundant and cheap, and turning it into chemicals would mitigate greenhouse gases. Recent studies show growing research interest in CO_2 conversion. Catalytic processes have been developed that fix CO_2 into valuable products: for example, CO_2 can react with epoxides to form cyclic carbonates (used as aprotic solvents) under mild conditions. Likewise, new catalysts have enabled polymerization of CO_2 with propylene oxide into polycarbonates (biodegradable plastics), as well as the production of methanol or formic acid. A recent research highlights combined solar-driven hydrogen from water splitting with microbial conversion of CO_2 to liquid fuels (a "bionic leaf" system), exemplifying how renewable energy and biology can merge to produce sustainable fuels. Green hydrogen – produced by electrolysis using solar or wind power – is also a focus, enabling carbon-free synthetic processes and fuel cells [28-32].

Materials and Polymers

The design of new materials is an important facet of green chemistry. Traditional plastics derived from petroleum are persistent pollutants, so there is intense development of biodegradable and bio-based polymers. Polymers from renewable monomers (e.g. polylactic acid from corn starch, polyhydroxyalkanoates from bacteria) are increasingly commercial. Companies like BASF have launched compostable polyesters (Ecoflex®, Ecovio®) that biodegrade to water, CO_2 and biomass. Advanced composites (e.g. cellulose nanofiber plastics) and recyclable polymers (chemical recycling back to monomers) are also under study. In electronics and energy, organic photovoltaic (OPV) materials and perovskite solar cells have progressed, offering lower-cost solar panels (though stability remains a challenge). Across materials, the drive is to ensure end-of-life degradation or circular reuse – for example, designing polymers that depolymerize under mild conditions or can be reprocessed without loss of properties [33-35].

Industrial Case Studies

Green chemistry principles have been applied in many industrial settings. A few notable examples include [36-40]:

Plant-Based Packaging

"PlantBottle" was introduced in 2009 as the first PET bottle partly made from plant-sugar-derived monoethylene glycol. The company initially used up to 30% plant carbon (via sugarcane ethanol) and later achieved a 100% renewable PET component. Imperial College analysis showed the PlantBottle reduced lifecycle carbon emissions by ~25%. Importantly, these bottles could be recycled using existing PET recycling streams.

Bioplastics (BASF Ecoflex/Ecovio)

BASF developed a family of biodegradable polyesters under the Ecoflex®/Ecovio® brands. These polymers incorporate biomass feedstocks (e.g. cassava starch) and enzymatically hydrolyze in compost. They are used in packaging films and bags, combining performance with environmental friendliness.

Catalytic Process Redesign

Many chemical manufacturers have revamped processes to eliminate toxic reagents. For example, a major pharmaceutical company replaced a step requiring highly toxic tin hydride by using a combination of green catalysts

(Pd(0) and a boron reagent), cutting solvent waste dramatically. Another notable case was IFP (France) developing the "Difasol" process: the nickel-catalyzed dimerization of olefins was run in an ionic liquid medium, giving higher selectivity and easy product separation. Although this particular example faced commercialization hurdles (see below), it illustrates how green engineering can improve process efficiency. These examples show that GC is not limited to labs – it is reshaping real production. Many companies now report metrics like E-factor (waste per product) and have green chemistry teams. Awards such as the U.S. EPA Green Chemistry Challenge highlight successful innovations each year (e.g. catalysts that convert glycerol to solketal, or a solvent-free process for a pharma intermediate).

Challenges in Adoption

Despite the promise of green chemistry, industrial adoption faces several hurdles [41-45]:

Regulatory and Certification Barriers

Changing an existing production process often triggers costly re-certification. For example, in pharmaceuticals, modifying a synthesis requires regulatory approval, which can be time-consuming and expensive. This discourages firms from switching to greener routes unless they have a clear business case.

Economic and Capital Costs

New green technologies may require specialized equipment (e.g. pressure reactors for supercritical CO_2, or electrochemical cells) that involve high initial investment. The IFP Difasol ionic liquid plant, though technically superior to the conventional process, struggled because it required new apparatus and lacked subsidies. Similarly, a continuous-flow $scCO_2$ reactor built by Thomas Swan (based on academia) had to shut down after 7 years because producing the chemical cheaply enough was difficult.

Technical Complexity and Performance

Green processes must match or exceed the performance of traditional methods. Early successes notwithstanding, some green alternatives deliver lower yields or slower rates. It takes significant R&D to make new catalysts or enzymes robust for industrial conditions. Moreover, many chemists and engineers are trained in classical methods and may lack knowledge of toxicology, biotechnology, or systems thinking. This knowledge gap slows innovation, as developers must consider life-cycle impacts, sustainability metrics, and engineering challenges simultaneously.

Supply Chain and Market Factors

Implementing GC at scale can require changes throughout the supply chain. For instance, a new biobased feedstock might not be available in the quantities or quality needed, or a downstream user might demand conventional materials. A cited example was a BPA-free food packaging coating: it performed well for some foods but not acidic ones, forcing dual systems and higher costs. Getting all partners (suppliers, manufacturers, regulators, consumers) to coordinate on new green chemistry can be difficult.

Lack of Metrics and Data

Quantifying "greenness" is nontrivial. Unlike yield or cost, environmental impact requires comprehensive life-cycle analysis (LCA) and may include hard-to-measure factors. This uncertainty can make companies cautious about investing in unproven green options. As the DES study shows, a solvent touted as green may have hidden trade-offs. Without clear metrics, it is hard to justify big changes. In summary, "just being green is not enough for a process to be a commercial success". Economic viability and regulatory compliance must align with environmental goals. Overcoming these challenges requires not only technical innovation but also supportive policy (e.g. subsidies or tax incentives for green technologies), education (training chemists in sustainability), and shifts in market demand (consumer preference for green products).

Future Directions and Opportunities

Looking ahead, several trends and research directions are poised to shape green chemistry in the 2020s [46-49]:

Computational Design and AI

Machine learning and AI are increasingly used to design greener molecules and processes. Recent reviews highlight how AI tools can predict reaction outcomes, optimize conditions, and even suggest novel synthetic routes that minimize waste. For example, algorithms can screen catalyst libraries or solvent choices for the lowest environmental footprint. As data (e.g. from past reactions) becomes more available, AI-guided chemistry promises to accelerate discovery of sustainable chemistry that adheres to GC principles.

Electrification and Photochemistry

The coupling of chemistry with renewable electricity is a major opportunity. Developments in organic electrosynthesis (using electrodes instead of reagents) will continue to grow. Likewise, photochemical methods (using sunlight or LED light with catalysts) allow reactions under ambient conditions. Novel photoreactors and flow processes are making these approaches more practical. Future research will likely integrate photocatalysis, electrocatalysis, and even photoelectrocatalysis (using light and voltage) for efficient, on-demand synthesis.

Integrated Biorefineries

Instead of isolated processes, future plants may operate as biorefineries that co-produce fuels, chemicals, and materials from biomass and CO_2. For example, microbial fermentation could be coupled with chemical catalysis (as in "artificial photosynthesis") to make high-value products directly from sunlight and carbon sources. Synthetic biology will continue to engineer microbes or cell-free systems to perform complex multi-step conversions in one vessel. The broad goal is to have seamless integration of biology and chemistry in manufacturing.

Circular Chemistry and Recycling

The concept of a circular economy will push chemistry to focus not just on production but on end-of-life. Research into chemical recycling of plastics (breaking them back into monomers) is accelerating. For instance, new catalysts now depolymerize polyesters or polycarbonates under mild conditions for reuse. Designing chemicals for disassembly ("benign by design") is an area of focus. Lifecycle thinking will become standard: every new material will be evaluated for its recyclability and net CO_2 impact.

Education and Policy

To realize these futures, green chemistry must be mainstreamed in education and policy. Studies note that green chemistry curricula and awareness training have been growing. Future efforts will likely emphasize systems thinking and sustainability metrics in chemistry education. On the policy side, governments are setting ambitious goals (e.g. "Net-Zero Carbon" by 2050) which will drive adoption of green processes. International programs like the IEA's Global Methane Pledge and corporate sustainability pledges will indirectly benefit green chemistry by raising the cost of pollution and carbon emissions.

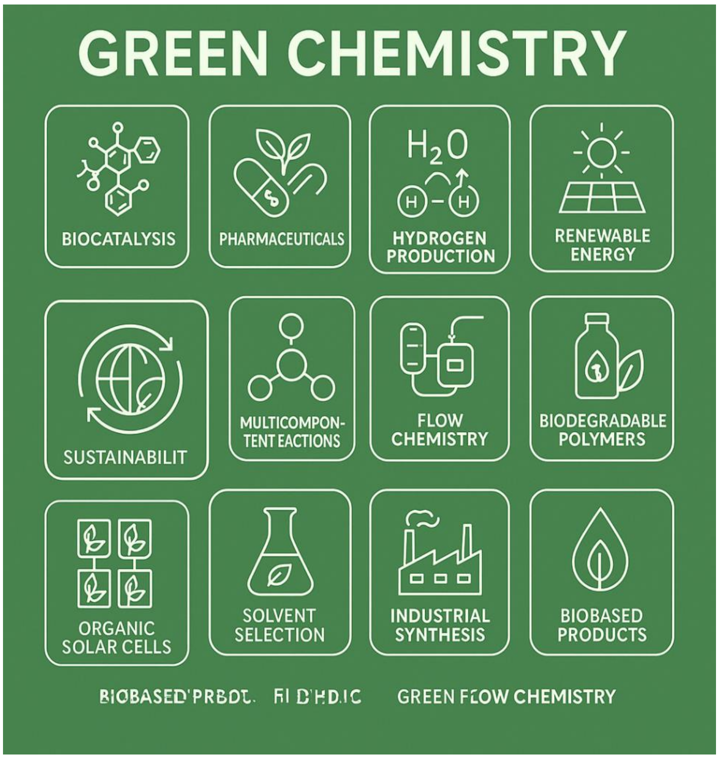


Figure 3. Multidisciplinary Applications and Future Innovation of Green Chemistry.

In summary, the future of green chemistry lies in multidisciplinary innovation: combining catalysis, automation, data science, and regulatory incentives to create a truly sustainable chemical industry (Figure 3). The path forward is clear but challenging: chemistry must evolve from "designing out" hazards at the molecular level to designing complete systems that are renewable, circular, and socially responsible.

Green chemistry is a powerful tool for environmental sustainability because it focuses on designing chemical processes that minimize waste, reduce hazardous substances, and optimize resource efficiency. Here's how it contributes:

Pollution Prevention

Instead of managing pollution after it occurs, green chemistry prevents it at the source by eliminating toxic reagents and reducing harmful emissions.

Resource Efficiency

Green chemistry promotes the use of renewable feedstocks and sustainable raw materials, reducing dependence on nonrenewable resources like fossil fuels.

Energy Conservation

By optimizing reaction conditions, such as using catalysts and conducting reactions at ambient temperatures, green chemistry lowers energy consumption and carbon footprints.

Safer Products

It encourages the design of biodegradable and non-toxic chemicals, ensuring that products break down harmlessly in the environment rather than accumulating as pollutants.

Circular Economy Support

Green chemistry enables non-toxic recycling and sustainable material flows, helping industries transition to a circular economy where waste is minimized and reused.

CONCLUSION

Green chemistry has matured from a theoretical concept to a driver of technological innovation for a sustainable future. Recent advances (2020–2024) demonstrate that we now have powerful tools – advanced catalysts, smart solvents, bioprocesses, and computational design – to rethink how chemicals are made. However, implementing these methods widely requires overcoming economic and systemic challenges. As this review has shown, progress is being made: industry case studies (e.g. biobased plastics, enzyme manufacture) and reported emission reductions testify to GC's impact. Continued emphasis on education, policy support, and multidisciplinary research will be essential. Looking ahead, integrating AI and renewable energy into chemical manufacturing holds great promise. For students and researchers, green chemistry offers an exciting frontier where chemistry can be a solution, not a problem, for environmental sustainability.

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Conflicts of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

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